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Felix Wilfred

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A JOURNAL FOR SOCIO-RELIGIOUS RESEARCH

Knowledge-Ethics for Our Times

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Editorial

Water, water everywhere

Nor any drop to drink

So wrote the English poet Samuel Coleridge. We would feel like saying almost the same thing about the sea of information that surrounds us. How to transform the maze of information and knowledge being produced into life-giving water is a challenging question humanity is facing today. The channeling of the potential of knowledge for humanizing purposes is a goal towards which all disciplines and all those actors involved in the production and dissemination of knowledge should work, and continuously reflect upon. This common project needs to be accompanied by ethical concerns. That is precisely what this issue of *Jeevadhara* wants to do under the theme of “Knowledge-Ethics for Our Times”.

The first article by me responds to the question why we need knowledge-ethics and indicates also some principles for its operationalization. The next two articles situate the discussion in the context of two marginalized groups – Dalits and Women: Nalini Rajan dwells on Dalit rationality and A. Metti deals with women’s body as a site of knowledge. The article of Patrick Gnanapragasam enters into a discussion on subjugated knowledge in the context of the Indian and Latin American subaltern studies project, and shows that it is proper to characterize the subaltern approach to knowledge as negotiation, rather than an opposition in binary mode to the Western knowledge. Joseph Pushpa shows how for the Indian subalterns indigenous knowledge is a matter of survival. The final article by Ananta Kumar Giri invites us to reflect on the importance of learning together.

My sincere appreciation and thanks go, in the first place, to the contributors who, amidst their many academic demands, found time to write the articles presented here. Since the time when I sounded to her about the theme of this issue months ago, right through the work of final editing, my doctoral student Kochurani has been most helpful, which I am happy to acknowledge. Pramila at my office saw to the correspondence with the writers and helped me meticulously with the work of computing, editing and checking the texts, for which I am grateful to her. Finally, I wish to thank Flora, my secretary, for her unfailing support as always, which made possible the bringing out of this volume, and for creating, through her fine managerial skills, a conducive atmosphere for serious study and research at the Asian Centre for Cross-Cultural Studies.

I hope that the efforts taken to prepare this issue will bear fruit in enlightening the readers and provoke them to think and act. I realize to my great joy and surprise that I have been editing the first number of *Jeevadhara* every year without any break for the past twenty-five years! It has been intellectually a stimulating experience for me to do this year after year, and a great learning experience too. I consider it a privilege and honour to be associated with *Jeevadhara* which is, perhaps, the most significant, creative and inter-disciplinary theological journal in the country.

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Knowledge Ethics for Our Times

Felix Wilfred

The author is the Director of the Chennai Academy of Science, Humanities and Religion. In the first part of the article he argues for the need of knowledge-ethics today, especially showing the connection between knowledge and care for life in all its forms as well as the communitarian dimension present in the genesis and development of knowledge and truth. These aspects acquire great relevance in the context of the use-and-throw knowledge that is associated with consumerism and manipulation of knowledge for control and domination. The second part of the article deals with some of the aspects in the operationalization of knowledge-ethics which, amidst increasing insecurity, calls for the search for new sources of knowledge for the survival of humanity and of nature. Like biodiversity, cultural diversity needs to be fostered in view of its potential of knowledge for the future of humanity. Knowledge-ethics is in service of this larger project.

The Sunday edition of any one of the major newspapers like *Times of India*, *Hindu*, or *Indian Express*, with all the supplements, may perhaps contain more quantity of information than what a person in ancient India was able to learn during his or her entire life-time. No wonder then one of the chief characteristics of our age is said to be the centrality of knowledge. One speaks today of “knowledge-society”. It is most obvious in the field of economy, where, unlike in former times when land, natural resources, machinery, industrial productions etc., were the raw-materials for the creation of wealth, today it is knowledge that has become the driving force also of economic processes. In this sense one could speak of knowledge as a *capital*. For the production of consumer goods, one relies on the technological application of knowledge.

At the same time, knowledge itself has become today a consumer good or a *commodity* to be marketed. The effect of this development is most visible in the field of higher education where disciplines that produce marketable knowledge are privileged to the detriment of other disciplines and branches of study which are viewed as a liability, and receive only step-motherly treatment. The all-pervasive and crucial role knowledge plays in production and the speed with which it is transmitted in contemporary life has led to the need for 'knowledge-management' on which organizations, industries and educational institutions are presently focusing their attention.¹

The same can be observed in daily life when knowledge also follows the same speed as commodities. It is in the very nature of consumerism that it presents always something new and seductive now, to be discarded at a lightning speed, and to be followed by something else. Things are only for the moment; fashions and gadgets are for a few weeks, or for a few months. Nay, people want to transform themselves into attractive commodities, which explain also the passion and the efforts taken for fashionable appearance. Superseding one good by another is in the very logic of consumerism today. It is the same path knowledge also follows. Innovation in the production of goods calls for ever new knowledge while the old knowledge becomes quickly obsolescent. We are in an age of *use-and-throw knowledge*. Knowledge serves for the moment, for a particular purpose after which it is left to perish on the dunghill of history.

Is knowledge only a capital to be managed? Is it only a commodity to be consumed? That seems to be the destiny of knowledge today. It is at this juncture that we need to raise some deeper questions

1 The term 'knowledge-management' came into common currency since 1986. Even now it remains a very vague and diffuse concept. Broadly it refers to information-sharing in organizations and storing and retrieving them for specific purposes. These informations serve knowledge-workers and others in the management of the organization, in network connectivity. Thanks to knowledge-management, newly acquired knowledge content is immediately made available for production of goods and services.

regarding the connection between knowledge and life in all its forms. This contribution departs from the premise that knowledge has a role to play for the *care of life*. If the laws of nature are discovered, the sole purpose cannot be simply to dominate and exploit it. Knowledge of nature is for fostering it as well as to foster the lives of human beings. Such an orientation which ascribes to knowledge a higher mission redeems it from an exclusive utilitarian goal and frees us from the attitude of viewing it as capital and commodity. It is this connection of knowledge with care of life that makes knowledge-ethics imperative.

Ethics in knowledge is meant to ensure that knowledge is primarily oriented to the care of life. If such is the case, then any move to exclude people from acquisition of knowledge which is important for fostering their life is something unethical. And yet, what we experience is manipulation and control of knowledge in view of controlling others who are deprived of knowledge. Traditionally, exclusion of people from knowledge has been practiced among various societies. In our country, the Dalits and the lower castes were excluded from acquiring knowledge, and in all societies, women were deprived of opportunities for knowledge-acquisition. Whereas in traditional society this exclusion was manifest, today exclusion takes place through subtle means, and knowledge is protected, ironically, through legal means like intellectual rights and patents.

Part I: Why Knowledge-Ethics?

Having made the link between knowledge and care of life, we need to go into the various dimensions of knowledge that invite us for an ethical approach in its regard. They all require certain ethical orientation. Moreover, we have three major players today in knowledge-production and dissemination: traditional institutions like universities, industry and market, and the state itself which supports researches,² all of which require a certain ethical orientation responding to our times and experiences.

2 Cf. Richard Whitley, *The Intellectual and Social Organization of the Sciences*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000 (2nd ed.).

The Ocean of Knowledge

By its very nature, knowledge is something that has no limits. No knowledge or form of knowledge is able to give us a comprehensive understanding of reality. Every knowledge implicitly indicates what is not yet known. For example, when scientific knowledge through empirical study and technological application, or the knowledge acquired through the study of society, or religious knowledge flowing from the sacred scriptures and tradition, each makes absolute claims of providing the ultimate and comprehensive knowledge about reality, they all violate the quality of boundlessness inherent in knowledge. Here we see an attempt to imprison knowledge within the confines of a limited domain or a particular discipline. The move towards inter-disciplinarity has not only the purpose of most effectively integrating and unifying the various forms of knowledge, but is also a recognition of the fact that knowledge is boundless and it stretches beyond conventional borders.³ The practice of inter-disciplinarity reshapes each discipline and could even lead to a turning point in its methodology.⁴ The realization that knowledge is inexhaustible would lead to respect it and receive it from countless sources. It will help to continually revise the acquired knowledge and relativize it. It is knowledge-ethics that will promote respect and awe before this vast ocean of knowledge.

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- 3 There is resistance to inter-disciplinarity because the practitioners of any particular disciplines feel insecure to venture out of their turf, which they will defend at any cost. Each discipline cultivates a culture of its own with its specific vocabulary and language, which makes it difficult for many to move out of the confines of their domain. Cf. Joe Moran, *Interdisciplinary*, Routledge, London/New York, 2007
 - 4 Such was the case for example when Fernand Braudel tried to relate historiography to geography, geology, economics etc., as we could observe in his monumental work F. Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l' époque de Philippe II*, Paris 1982, (5th ed.). Behind Braudel's interdisciplinary approach was the conviction that change in human society takes place through the interaction of various underlying forces and elements in any given situation.

Knowledge Anchored in the Knower

Knowledge is something that is indissociably linked to the subject or the knower. The tragedy of modern times is that this intimate connection has been lost. Knowledge would appear as free-floating bits and pieces of information. In the past there was an effort to free knowledge from the subject in the name of neutrality and objectivity. The long drawn out debate in the matter has made it plain that in every affirmation the subject or knower is implicated in one form or other, and the effort to build up a knowledge edifice without the subject would be like a construction without proper foundations. What we realize further through this debate is that knowledge and truth are not in opposition to the subject or the knower, but rather that the subject is an integral part of the knowledge-constitution. This is most evident in the world of history which is not simply a representation but a record of the subjective perception and interpretation in relation to the past and its events.⁵ Some would go even to the point of claiming that perception of reality itself is a social construction dependent on people's culture and their worldview.

Under modern technocratic conditions, the same question has re-appeared in a different form. Knowledge is a matter of system, of networking. It is out there in the internet to be downloaded, in the computer to be retrieved and in manuals to be culled out. There is no way knowledge affects the subject except perhaps in terms of its utility or for its instrumental value.⁶ On the other hand, truth is a matter of encounter of the subject with the reality, something that is absent when knowledge is made into a system with its own logic and procedures. Ethics germinates when the subject is inscribed into reality

5 Cf. Felix Wilfred – Jose Maliekal (Eds), *The Struggle for the Past. Historiography Today*, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, Chennai, 2002.

6 It is worth recalling here that John Henry Newman faced in his time the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and others with overriding influence in the realm of education. This led Newman to distinguish between “useful knowledge” and education as “cultivation of the mind”. John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Longmans, Green and Co. London, 1907.

in terms of its engagement with it. This has a transformative value. Knowledge and truth can transform the one who is involved in their quest. No wonder, then, that in many cultures the knowledge of the self was viewed as the window to understand the world, the nature and the universe. This is true, for example, of Indian classical tradition as well as in the Socratic tradition of the West. "Know thyself" was the axiom that was the cornerstone in the pedagogy of Socrates.

Something Sacred

Knowledge has a *sacred* character.⁷ By this I do not mean to turn everything into religious knowledge. Rather even the most mundane knowledge has a sacred character. It is because there is an aspect of gift involved in truth and knowledge for the fact that they are discovered and one receives them, and every gift is something sacred. The sacred character of knowledge is a reminder that it cannot be produced and circulated like other commodities. Knowledge does not come entirely from us. The gift and sacral character of knowledge is very evident in the case of poets, who claim that their insights are derived from inspiration, implying its sacred character. It is true as well in the field of natural sciences. For example, in the famous *eureka* of Pythagoras, there is a sense of excitement and wonder at the experience of having been given like the flash of lightning a knowledge that was hitherto unrevealed. There are many works both in the East and the West which are anonymous. It is this awareness of the nature

7 As the Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr puts it: "In the Orient knowledge has always been related to the sacred and to spiritual perfection. To know has meant ultimately to be transformed by the very process of knowing, as the Western tradition was also to assert over the ages before it was eclipsed by the postmedieval secularization and humanism that forced the separation of knowing from being and intelligence from the sacred. The Oriental sage has always embodied spiritual perfection; intelligence has been seen ultimately as a sacrament, and knowledge has been irrevocably related to the sacred and its actualization in the being of the knower". The author makes an important point, but it seems to me that his approach is somewhat from individualistic spiritualist perspective, and he does not pay enough attention to various dimensions of the sacred in treating of knowledge. His conception of 'sacred' too seems to be quite restricted.

of truth as a gift which made these classical authors to conceal their names as authors of works. We spoke about the subject involved in knowledge. The sacred character of knowledge tells us that knowledge is not entirely of the subject. In the engagement with the reality, there is a process of reception. It is this sacredness which makes us approach knowledge and truth with a sense of wonder. In fact, it is the sense of wonder which gave birth to some of the most original creations and inventions human beings are capable of.

Communitarian Enterprise

Pursuit of truth is *a communitarian enterprise*. Knowledge is intrinsically related to community by its nature, genesis and growth. Behind it is the conviction, as Karl Rahner put it, that

If a human community has no longer any common possession of truth, then both it and the individual would be destroyed, i.e. degraded to a merely biological and physical level, a level on which alone man (taken as an individual and as community) cannot exist.⁸

Knowledge derives from the community and is to be directed to fostering the life of the community. This makes knowledge-ethics an ethics of responsibility. No single individual can produce a language. Knowledge, like language, requires a whole community for its production and sustenance. We may employ here a useful distinction Ferdinand de Saussure, the father of modern linguistics, made. By *langue* is meant the linguistic heritage and possibility created by a particular linguistic community. *Parole* instead means what an individual is able to draw and employ from this immense reservoir of *langue* which is the creation of the community.⁹ In the matter of knowledge what the individuals – no matter how distinguished they may be – attain stand on the shoulders of the giant which the community is. There is the participation of the entire community in different ways for the communication and growth in the field of

8 Karl Rahner, "A Small Fragment on the Collective Finding of Truth" in his *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1969, p. 82.

9 Cf. John Sturrock, *Structuralism*, Fontana Press, London, 1986, 1993

knowledge. The modern times has given exaggerated importance to the individual as producer of knowledge, and the place of the community has been sidelined. Sociology of knowledge - understood not in a theoretical but empirical sense - also confirms the fact that knowledge-production involves the whole community.¹⁰

Today under late capitalism, knowledge as a commodity has been made into possession of individuals. The whole legal machinery is set in motion to defend knowledge as an individual or corporate possession, what, in fact, is common property of the entire humanity. We have the well-known regimes of Intellectual Property Rights and the practice of patenting which all amount to usurpation of common people's knowledge. Curiously, the knowledge produced by the people through their immediate engagement with nature and its observation is converted into private possession of economic interests. A very glaring case is that of the patenting of products from neem leaves, or the patenting of *basmati* rice. If control of knowledge is an important ingredient of colonialism, this is definitely the case with biopiracy and the patent regime of today.¹¹ It is a fact that regions in the world least developed are also the ones with most biodiversity. The agribusiness and the transnational corporations are targeting the last resources of the colonized people – their biodiversity and agricultural production processes. The patent hegemony through which the empire tries to control the world is in fact a stealthy usurpation of the precious knowledge fund of the subaltern peoples.

In short, the very fact of the close relationship of knowledge to community and the present situation which privileges knowledge to

10 Sociology of knowledge in its classical form goes back to discussions of an epistemological and ideological nature by such thinkers as Durkheim, Mannheim, Max Scheler, Nietzsche and others. The radical formulation of the question was done by Marx who saw consciousness and thought determined by the social realities. The question has been developed from a phenomenological perspective by P.L. Berger, *The Foundation of Knowledge in Everyday Life*, Penguin Books, London 1966.

11 Cf. Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy: The Plunder of Nature and Knowledge*, South End Press, Cambridge, 1996; Surender Singh Chauhan, *Biodiversity, Biopiracy and Biopolitics. The Global Perspectives*, Kalinga Publications, Delhi, 2001.

possession of individuals and corporations calls for a knowledge-ethics for today.

Knowledge and Emancipation

Knowledge, especially from a sapiential perspective, has inherently an emancipatory dimension. “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free”(Jn 8:32). This freedom is indicated in the first place by the light knowledge represents. Plato’s famous metaphor of the cave in his *Republic* is a classical example. It depicts the journey of individuals and communities “from darkness to light”. The light of knowledge makes us see reality as it is.

The emancipatory dimension has a collective and social character, going beyond the deliverance of the individual. Keeping people in ignorance is a universal strategy for domination, and we have innumerable examples from the past as well as from contemporary history of the world. We see, for example, in the case of risky clinical trials – now being exported more and more to the developing world – how the ignorance of the poor is exploited. Coming to knowledge through educative process gives dignity and self-confidence to people. They are placed in a position to free and defend themselves. Few people understood this as Ambedkar who found in the acquisition of knowledge through education, the liberation of the most oppressed people – the Dalits of the country. It has been observed that education is the best defence against human rights violation. Knowledge-ethics is crucial today so that this liberative dimension of knowledge is not lost sight of but put into praxis.

The divorce that has happened between knowledge and emancipation is due, among other things, to the fact that the former has been viewed and judged in terms of formal rationality. The difference between formal rationality and substantive rationality is as much as the map of the city and the city.¹² The confining of

12 The distinction goes back to Max Weber. Formal rationality is procedural and etc. On the other hand, substantive rationality is something that is connected with the pursuit of values in the process of which an individual or a community tries to make them consistent providing them with life-related justification. This distinction is better understood when we consider it in relation to democracy – formal and substantive.

knowledge to the formal realm has prevented the emergence of substantive rationality which is oriented towards the project of emancipation. As Immanuel Wallerstein rightly observes,

The classical epistemological debates freeze our intellectual possibilities, in particular our ability to see the interplay between the intellectual, the moral and the political aspects of the structure of knowledge. They, therefore make infinitely more difficult, if not impossible, arriving at substantive rationality, and they push us to rely on the ever more fragile platform of formal rationality.¹³

Today the dissociation of knowledge from substantive rationality can be observed in the isolation of the formal knowledge-workers and information technologists from the community as they inhabit their own space – the cyberspace.

Part II : Knowledge-Ethics in Operation

Our preceding reflections indicated the need for knowledge-ethics that responds to the present situation. Now we need to enquire in what ways knowledge could be operative so that the primary purpose of knowledge for the care of life is realized. In the following I intend to articulate some basic principles for knowledge-ethics for our times.

A Process of Inclusion

The first principle of knowledge ethics can be articulated as a process of inclusion. In our present world where knowledge is viewed as a possession and is deployed for the purpose of domination, this principle acquires great relevance. At the social level, class and caste go to determine who will be included and who will be excluded from knowledge. As for gender, even though there has come about more opening towards women's education, nevertheless, there are deep prejudices about their capacity for knowledge in certain realms. Women continue to experience this kind of exclusion.

The organization of knowledge in the present world reflects the organization of the society. Accordingly, some kinds of knowledge

13 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Uncertainties of Knowledge*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2004, pp. 149-150.

are prized whereas others are ignored and devalued. Elimination of knowledge takes place by creating a pre-designed order. Anything that does not fit into it is undermined, ignored and eliminated. This order today is that of the market. In other words, knowledge that does not serve the market and its law of supply and demand are discarded. On the other hand, we know that ordinary people through their labour and craft contribute to the accumulation of knowledge. Do not a farmer, mason, carpenter, fisherman, shepherd, weaver and potter produce knowledge and skills by doing their daily jobs? And yet, because of the low social and economic position they occupy, the forms of knowledge they create do not get recognized.

When we speak of inclusion we refer here also to the practice of excluding certain disciplines and certain forms of knowledge. As is well-known, today some branches of natural sciences are promoted and knowledge is almost exclusively identified with these sciences. The process of inclusion makes knowledge integral which is necessary for the care of life. As in the field of literature where different genre contribute to gain insight into life, its movements and dynamics, so also knowledge needs to be explored from all sides. What would result is an enrichment and greater approximation to truth.

Widening the Sources of Knowledge

The second principle follows from the first. The process of inclusion implies that knowledge is not limited to few selected sources but is widened to reach new and less known ones. We live in a world of repressed and homogenized systems of knowledge, which suppresses alternative sources of knowledge outside the established orthodoxy. We just cannot be content with knowledge associated with the theoretical process of objectivation, institutionalization and legitimation.

We need new sources of knowledge also because we increasingly realize everywhere the presence of unpredictability and indeterminacy, including the sphere of science. We are not sure what types of knowledge will be required for tomorrow, since we cannot rely on the knowledge of today. The confidence that once exuded for a future of humanity through a linear progress has been shaken. In the past, issues like poverty, violence were addressed as deviance from this linear progress and as collateral damages or prices to be paid for

the progress.¹⁴ Today, we are confronted with serious problems such as the survival of nature, water-scarcity, care of the earth, terrorism, human security, human rights, etc., which occupy the centre-stage. The received funds of knowledge and those promised by various sciences are inadequate to come to terms with such issues. The prevalent concepts and cognitive tools seem to be incapable of responding sensitively to the present plight of humanity. We need to rely on human ingenuity in creation of new knowledge and new methods to be able to address new questions, and look for knowledge and wisdom from different quarters.

A third important reason to look for alternative sources of knowledge derives from the collapse of the so-called "grand-narratives" which served as all-encompassing and totalizing systems. There is the realization that knowledge cannot be so neatly ordered into systems and projects. It is scattered all around and can be found everywhere. That leads me to the next point.

Everyday Practices and Knowledge

We need to enquire whether the everyday life as it is lived out by ordinary men and women do not contain seeds of creative knowledge. Everyday life brings forth a wealth of knowledge that defies systematic production of it through established means and institutions. We often associate knowledge mainly with the production of the goods and services, and its circulation (knowledge of the market), but fail to study the knowledge produced in the process of consumption. For, whatever good is offered goes through a process of appropriation by the various subjects, a process which brings in creative forms of knowledge. The way individuals and groups go through the various products are different. This is true also of institutions. For example, one may imagine democracy as something well-defined with its specific contours. But the way people of south Asia have gone about it leads us to conclude that it is not the case that democracy has shaped South Asia; it is as much true that South Asia has shaped democracy and its re-conception through its practice of it.¹⁵ In the

14 Cf. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Op.cit.*

15 This is the conclusion of an important study made by the Centre for the

process, there has come about deeper and wider knowledge about the institution of democracy.

The prevailing order and system seem to completely control the lives of the people in every realm, apparently with no possibility for resistance. The dominant knowledge which serves the established order imposes itself in such a way that it would appear that it simply requires the compliance of the people. And yet, the truth is that everyday life of the people brings about knowledge also through the ingenious ways in which they go about with the powers that seem to preside over their destiny. There are subtle ways in which they subvert the established order and this has to do with their everyday practices.¹⁶ Such subtle ways eroding the reigning system is not only related to modern life in mass culture, but is even more active in the traditional societies of hierarchical order.¹⁷ These are important both at the theoretical and practical levels. At the theoretical level it challenges the view that people are simply passive agents submitting themselves to the imposed and manipulated knowledge and culture.¹⁸ At the practical level, they question the prognosis that there is no way out of the imposed system of knowledge and culture. Peoples' everyday practices with their multiple tactics to take on the powers if not

Study of Developing Societies, Delhi. See, *Democracy in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2008.

- 16 Cf. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley/LA/California, 1984; Cf. also Michael E. Gardiner, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, Routledge, London/New York, 2000; Cf. also Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol I, Verso, London/New York, 1991
- 17 Cf. Steven Parish, *Hierarchy and Its Discontents: Culture and the Politics of Consciousness in Caste Society*, University Of Pennsylvania Press, Pennsylvania, 1996; James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak : Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Yale University Press, New York, 1985.
- 18 This is a point that has been hammered by the critical theorists like Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer and others who analyzed the mass society and culture. This is true also of Foucault's analysis of power and the control it exercises, which all leave little room for the agency of the people and their imagining of alternatives. Cf. David Couzens Hoy & Thomas McCarthy, *Critical Theory*, Blackwell, Oxford/Cambridge, 1994; Ed. Fred Rush, *The Cambridge Companion to Critical Theory*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004.

frontally, at least from the sides, offer hope to make a breach in what may appear an impregnable system.

Dissent as Source of Knowledge

In the Indian tradition, it is not only the orthodox schools (*astika*) which provide knowledge; no less insightful knowledge of a different kind flow from the dissenting Indian tradition (*nastika*). This could also be said of the Christian tradition wherein those who protested (later called "Protestants") brought forth such a rich knowledge about the deeper sense of the Christian Gospel and practice. Dissent is a source of creativity since it has to go against the dominant views often connected also with power. Conformity causes stagnation of thought and knowledge, whereas dissent by unsettling and challenging what is, projects a different order of things. This is a point thinkers like Jürgen Habermas do not seem to realize. In his scheme, truth and knowledge are obtained through consensus, and it allows little room for dissent as a source of creative knowledge. On the other hand, today feminism could be characterized as a dissenting tradition since it challenges a world that is based on the knowledge of man. Here truth and knowledge are not obtained by consensus. Rather, feminism brings in a new method of enquiry, a new epistemology and in every domain of life brings out a depth and breadth of knowledge that has not been available in the male knowledge-system, thanks to women's dissent.

Suffering and the Dawn of Knowledge

Like dissent, suffering is a situation of crisis, and therefore most creative in nature. It can, of course, lead to the experience of dejection and despair. But it can also trigger the imagination and bring forth some profound realizations, especially when it is a suffering in defense of the truth. We need to only think of the prison-writings of so many great men and women. Tested by adversity, they have given to humanity pearls of knowledge and wisdom. One could think of the writings and letters of Gandhi from the prison, of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison-Notebooks*, and the prison-writings and letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the stirring calls of Nelson Mandela from the maximum security prison of Robben Island. Does not Buddhism

which has given rise to the development of immense knowledge all over Asia have reality of suffering as its central motif? In the Judeo-Christian religious history, prophets stand as figures of suffering. For example, through personal suffering Hosea and Jeremiah are led to realization of sublime truths.¹⁹

There is another aspect to the suffering in relation to knowledge and truth. The pursuit of knowledge and truth is a continuous struggle. Like adversity that sharpens the mind to perceive deeper truths and arrive at new knowledge and realization, so too the struggle and agony for truth and knowledge leads to appreciate them and leaves one with a sense of wonder and amazement. One has to pay a prize for knowledge which is not “cheap” but “costly grace”. This is a truth that has become difficult to understand in a consumer society where there is excess of information, and that too at the click of a mouse.

Interpretative Knowledge of Arts

Truth and knowledge are not simply representation of realities; nor are the arts. Inherent in every knowledge and understanding is a process of interpretation which is an art. The more this art is cultivated, there takes place a deeper perception of truth and knowledge. A novel or a piece of painting through the work of imagination could lead us to a deeper understanding in the way we perceive and order the world. What is specific of the knowledge art proffers is the fact that it is a knowledge that elicits a response from us, not merely at the intellectual level but involving the whole person.

Art relates truth and knowledge to beauty as could be seen very clearly for example in fine-arts. A pragmatic and utilitarian approach to truth needs to be challenged by the aesthetic and non-teleological orientation arts manifest. Arts are a window to realize the immensity of knowledge and beauty. They lead us into a wondrous world of possibilities, thanks to the fertile imagination they imply. In this sense art, like dissent, can make a breach into the stultifying systems of

19 Cf. Felix Wilfred, “Prophetic Anger and Sapiential Compassion. Grappling with Evil Today” in *Concilium* 2009/1 (shortly to appear); cf. also Iain Wilkinson, *Suffering a Sociological Introduction*, Polity Press, Cambridge/Malden, 2005; Veena Das and Arthur Kleinman, *Social Suffering*, University of California Press, California, 1997.

routine-knowledge and the compulsion of the practices the systems call for. It challenges any claim that identifies truth and knowledge with propositional statements. If we define the function of ethics as restraint on power and its abuse, then genuine art as a source of knowledge, precisely does this, by challenging the hegemony of the knowledge of the dominant order.²⁰ Moreover, art conveys knowledge most effectively and powerfully as for example in theatric performance. What we note here is that reason is not simply the sole source of knowledge as modernity would like us to believe, but experience and imagination as exemplified in the field of art represent a rich mine of truth and knowledge.

A simple painting like “*Guernica*” of Picasso, brings to us palpably knowledge about the horrors of war than volumes of description. The controversy surrounding M.F. Hussain’s paintings leads us to a fresh understanding of the relationship of art and religion. Knowledge about India’s daily life comes alive in the paintings by some of the best known artists of the country like “The Beggar’s Family” of Raja Ravi Varma, “The Village Group” by Arita Sher Gil or Jemini Roy’s “Santal Boy with a Drum”. Speaking about the unique potential of knowledge embedded in art, Aileen John observes,

Art is one of the phenomena which show traditional models of propositional knowledge to be inadequate. We need a theory of knowledge which embraces such things as knowing how to perceive, imagine, and feel aptly, and knowing what a certain experience is like. Finally, the cognitively stimulating powers of art are a good resource for studying the role of such factors as creativity, surprise, interest, and choice in the emergence of new ideas.²¹

20 Of course, we need to recognize the fact that art itself can be co-opted within the dominant system of power and could be deployed for the cause of power and its maintenance.

21 Eileen John, “Art and Knowledge” in Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, pp. 339-340.

Democratization of Knowledge

A fourth principle in knowledge ethics is that it should be accessible to all, especially those whom it affects in one way or the other. This principle is important in the context of modernity one of whose chief characteristics is functional specialization. There is a widespread idea that human development and progress are based on specialization. The more specialized a society is in its function, the more it is thought to have progressed. Unfortunately, the result often is one of fragmentation and appropriation of knowledge for oneself. The culture of specialization presupposes that certain knowledge is a matter of experts or specialists to which ordinary men and women are not supposed to have access, and they are also not capable of it. The claim on the basis of specialization is a clever way of barring access to knowledge by the people. Could knowledge of economy be left to experts in economics? But the fact is that economy is something that affects every one's life. Hence knowledge about it should be accessible to everyone. In this sense, we may speak of democratization of knowledge. It is only proper when, as we noted, the whole community is involved in different ways for the genesis of knowledge. What is commonly produced should also be available to all, and may not be appropriated by some.

On the other hand, there is a whole tradition of debarring people from access to knowledge. In traditional India the priestly class controlled the entire knowledge system. It gave power not only to control people and the society, but even control over the gods, and the kings depended on the priestly class for knowledge even about mundane things. Similar control over knowledge by priestly class could be traced also in Christian history.

Today, the priestly tribe is replaced by a new class of people who are the experts. We cannot allow our world and society to be ruled by "expertocracy" – the rule of specialists. For, we cannot assume that these experts – no matter in which field – put into use their expert knowledge for the care of life, for the benefit of the community, and do not act on the basis of their interest and desires external to knowledge. Moreover, the image of experts as those who could give us certain knowledge in a particular field stands challenged by growing

“uncertainty of Knowledge”²² in the present-day world. Unfortunately, the views of the experts could be seriously conditioned by ideology or by economic incentives. No wonder then, there is taking place a suspicion among the people regarding experts and the transparency of their views.

More basically, under the principle of access to knowledge we need to bring in also the present scenario of education. Universal primary education opens up the possibility of knowledge for all.²³ But as experience shows, this possibility for knowledge is, in practice, denied when proper economic and social conditions are not created. For example, when a family does not have the basic necessities and depends on the labour of its children, the access to knowledge is denied to them because of material conditions. Access to knowledge, then, involves providing opportunities. In a world full of knowledge and information, it is criminal neglect to let millions of people, especially children, to be deprived of education. Knowledge needs to be open also at the higher level of education. It is this prompted UNESCO in 2002 to advocate “open educational resources” for higher education in developing countries. In India, the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) which was instituted on 13 June 2005, instead of making knowledge available to the poor strata of the society, seems to follow pro-elite policies, as was evident with its comments in May 2006 against reservation for the backward classes in the IITs.

Suppression of Knowledge – Unethical

Knowledge-ethics calls for yet another principle that would ensure that whatever knowledge that has accrued to the benefit of the community and of humanity should not be suppressed. Again here

22 Cf. Immanuel Wallerstein, *Op.cit.*

23 It is gratifying to note that at the time of writing this article *The Right to Education Bill* is being introduced in the parliament that would make free education for children between age 6 – 14, a fundamental right. Drafted in 2005, the bill was put into limbo until recently when it was resuscitated. One of the features of the bill is the reservation of 25% seats in private schools for children hailing from poor families. It is a wake-up call to schools catering to the elites.

suppression of knowledge could take place often for the sake of wielding power and domination. A historic example is that of colonial rulers who ignored and suppressed local knowledge of the colonized peoples. It is part of the logic of domination that it systematically sidelines the knowledge of the subjugated, their language which is repository of experiences. These forms of local knowledge are not simply folklore or ornamental, but have contributed substantially for the common fund of the knowledge of humanity. For example, vaccination against small-pox which was a very crucial invention against a disastrous epidemic has its origins in the folk-practice of “variolation” connected with the worship of goddess Mariamma or Sitala.

Far from being a contribution of Western science, vaccination appears to have been at the very most an adaptation of folk practice of inoculating with live smallpox matter and perhaps simply a direct imitation of a variant of traditional practice that employed cowpox matter as the inoculating agent. In this view, Jenner’s contribution lay in his ability to listen to local people and take advantage of their knowledge rather than in independent invention. The traditional practice almost certainly came to Europe from outside; it was widespread existing in the Middle East, India and China.²⁴

As for writing of history, many facts are suppressed and what is highlighted are the stories of those who dominated the society – kings, feudal lords, religious heads, and so on. Knowledge about those who are eliminated from the dominant historical narratives needs to be reconstituted without which the narrative would be ideologically coloured and incomplete. When we deconstruct history²⁵ – as we should - we begin to realize that what is made to appear as continuous and factual is in fact are not so, as there are gaps since it suppresses

24 Cf. Frédérique Apffel Marglin & Stephen Apffel Marglin, (Eds), *Dominating Knowledge-Development, Culture and Resistance*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 18.

25 Cf. Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History*, Routledge, London-New York, 2001.

the story of marginal peoples and groups. That is why women and marginalized peoples try to re-write history, an important exercise in finding knowledge and truth.

There is even an obscurantist dimension to this suppression and ignorance. In the traditional field of *Siddha* medicine, for example, secrecy was of paramount importance. One preferred to conceal medical knowledge than reveal them, often for fear that knowledge communicated in this way may lose its efficacy, or for fear that this knowledge may give advantage to others.²⁶ In this way, not only much knowledge was lost, but also the growth of the Indian medical system was stunted.

Social Consequences of Knowledge

There is another principle which calls for our attention: Every form of knowledge should attend to social consequences. Knowledge is always located in time and in a particular historical context. Very often knowledge is presented divorced from the context, and many scientists tend to highlight the epistemic ends of knowledge and do not pay attention to the social consequences of their knowledge and action.²⁷ It is the absence of social consciousness and solidarity which makes a lot of elites and the educated to inform themselves selectively about many matters, whereas they exhibit gross ignorance in matters that are of a social and political nature. Zygmunt Bauman speaks of the importance of a “knowledgeable and committed public”:

[S]igns abound of fading interest in the acquisition and exercise of social skills, of people turning their backs on politics, of growing political apathy and loss of interest in the running of the political process. Not only do *technical* skills need to be continually refreshed, not only does job-oriented education need

26 It is interesting to note that also in esoteric groups everywhere, secrecy of knowledge has been a central feature.

27 Cf. R. Lekshmi, “Ethics of Science in Its Epistemic and Practical Goals”, in *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, vol.23 no. 4 (2006) pp. 43-58.

to be lifelong. The same is required and with a yet greater urgency, for the education in citizenship.²⁸

I think we could identify two main reasons for this state of affairs: First of all there is the prevalent techno-managerial mind-set which believes that, deeply political and social matters like poverty and discrimination could be tackled by managerial skills and techniques, and they do not require any knowledge from the fields. This isolates them from day-to-day realities of the social and political order. Secondly, knowledge about realities of the society and common good do not serve, in their view, to further their self-interest. As in the past, the Indian middle-class is keen on education, to a much higher degree today. However, the same middle class, when it comes to knowledge regarding the situation of the poor and poverty, most often deliberately brackets it (something like the Husserlian *epoché*), so that they could inhabit insulated and undisturbed in the island of consumerism and cyber-knowledge, while the sea of misery is raging all around. This callous expulsion of the poor from the horizon of their consciousness is characteristic of the expanding Indian middle-class.²⁹

In his novel *White Tiger*, that won Booker Prize, Aravind Adiga, graphically describes the gulf that divides the two Indias.³⁰

The Violence of Imposed Knowledge

A final principle of knowledge-ethics concerns the practice of imposing knowledge on others. Imposition of knowledge does not respect the freedom of the subject. The most violent form of

28 Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a world of Consumers*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2008, pp. 190-191. This characterization applies very much to the Indian middle-class. Cf. also, Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming life*, Polity Press, Cambridge/Malden, 2007.

29 Making an incisive analysis of the growing Indian middle-class, Varma notes that the values of restraint, frugality, etc. that characterized the Indian middle class with Gandhi as model in the decades immediately after the Independence, has now been replaced by ostentation and exhibitionism, under the influence of consumerism. Cf. Pavan K. Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2007; see also Sudhir Kakar & Katharina Kakar, *The Indians- Portrait of a People*, Viking, Penguin Group, New Delhi, 2007; Sunil Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1997

30 Cf. Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, 2008.

imposition is represented by totalitarianism – political, cultural, and religious, etc.³¹ Truth is identified with the reason of the state or of the dominator, or the authority of the religious head, and it is imposed. The imposition is accompanied by homogenization and standardization of knowledge as a means of control. What is imposed is supposed to be unalloyed truth, absolute and certain, and therefore deserving to be assented to with no questions or doubts raised. Such claims are based epistemologically on the universal character of the knowledge imposed, which often turns out to be something that has emerged from and is applicable only to a particular context.

Knowledge-ethics would challenge this imposition also because of its serious consequences. The arrogance of possessing ultimate knowledge and truth or the final solution leads to perpetration of serious human rights violation. Totalitarian regimes of various hues and colours have been also guilty of most horrendous crimes against humanity as the Nazi and fascist regimes have been, and religious authorities have turned into executors of those with dissenting views. Like totalitarianism and religious dogmatism, scientism too pretends to possess the only form of legitimate knowledge. There seems to be a lot of affinity among these three phenomena. Knowledge-ethics would go into the analysis of the mechanism of why certain practices and discourses were permitted while certain other forms were forbidden, and expose the “conspiracy” of the powerful against the subalterns. In the field of education it would check that knowledge is not transmitted through a “banking system” which is unethical because it deprives the subjects of the exercise of their critical power and imagination.

What the practice of dogmatic imposition does not recognize is that knowledge and truth have many facets and dimensions perceived differently, or as Paschal put it, “truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on the other side”.³² Modernity in some of its aspects is a violent imposition on the whole of humanity of certain understanding of the

31 Cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Press, New York, 1951

32 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670). Translated with an Introduction by Dr. A.J. Krailsheimer, 1966, 1995. Penguin Books Ltd. London, 1966, V, 294.

human and human progress. Besides, the self-confidence which science exuded from nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth was based on the certainty it claimed to give. But then, new developments have shown that with the passing of years, there is growing skepticism about such claims.

The violent imposition of knowledge fails to recognize basically that there is a plurality of paths to truth. It also conceals a false belief in the superiority of modern knowledge-systems. But as Claude Levi-Strauss has demonstrated, knowledge among the people who are characterized as “savage” and uncivilized could possess highly complex modes of knowledge and intricate classifications.³³ Referring to the distinction between knowledge-theory and “know-how” knowledge embedded in the day to day life, Michel de Certeau notes,

It [theory] retains the word’s ancient and classical meaning of “looking at/showing” (“voir/faire voir”) or of “contemplating” (*theorein*). It is “enlightened”. Primitive knowledge, insofar as it has been gradually dissociated from the techniques and languages that objectified it, becomes another form of intelligence possessed by the individual subject and poorly defined except in neutral terms (to have flair, tact, taste, judgment, instinct, etc.) that oscillate among the esthetic, cognitive, and reflex systems, as if “know-how” amounted to a principle of knowledge that nobody could capture.³⁴

Violence manifests in another form when knowledge and truth are systematically manipulated to serve vested interests. Whereas in the past violence took on brutal form, today it is exercised in subtle forms, and truth is its most vulnerable victim.

Conclusion

Our world today is full of information; yet, wisdom is in short supply. This is because there is no real critical processing of knowledge or learning taking place. And if anything is learnt it quickly

33 Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1966.

34 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p. 72.

goes into oblivion. This “hurried” nature of knowledge has divested itself of its noble task of caring for life. Instead of becoming part of a centrifugal (other-centered) movement, knowledge has been turned into a centripetal movement (a self-seeking movement) to promote self-interest and fulfillment of one’s desires.

Knowledge-ethics, in short, is an attempt to infuse knowledge and truth with the responsibility for the other, the society and the world, and indeed to care for all life – from the blade of grass to the most complex species - human beings. What could prove to be damaging for the future, which is becoming increasingly uncertain, is the irresponsibility towards truth and knowledge. As a common and communitarian enterprise, the quest for knowledge and truth needs to be accompanied by a sense of solidarity. It implies that the benefits from new frontiers of knowledge be directed foremost to alleviate the suffering of the poor and the marginalized, women and the subaltern.

On the other hand, given that the acquired fund of epistemic knowledge is not able to come to terms with the present-day problems affecting humanity, a wise course for the future is to ensure that, like the immense diversity in nature, so too in the field of knowledge, diversity be cultivated. Herein is the importance of directing our attention to neglected indigenous knowledge, and bring to limelight the subjugated pieces of knowledge which are in danger of disappearing.

The matter boils down to fostering cultures and cultural diversity. For, every culture is also a system of knowledge and it has ingenious ways to cope up with new situations. Even more, cultures exhibit potential for the discovery of new knowledge and insights about nature, the society, the world and the universe. When we work towards a growth in knowledge in the spirit of inclusion by fostering plurality, there is reasonable hope that humanity can face more confidently the future than what appears to be the case just now. Knowledge-ethics is nothing but a help towards this larger project.

Dalit Rationality and the Problem of 'Radical Alterity'

Nalini Rajan

The author is Professor at Asian College of Journalism, Chennai. In our increasingly pluralistic world, rationality is no more a univocally defined concept. Whose rationality – is a significant question which creates space to speak of “dalit rationality”. In this article what the author does –in her own words - is “to argue that while postmodernists are justified in exposing the inability of the modern nation-state to completely respect ‘Otherness’, the use of the term ‘radical alterity’ or ‘absolute Otherness’ by extreme postmodernists to describe the ‘situation’ of dalit consciousness with respect to Brahmin consciousness is logically and philosophically incoherent”.

The starting-point of this essay is a perspective presented recently by M.S.S. Pandian on the tension in India today between upper caste public rationality and dalit (former untouchable) irrational violence.¹ I reproduce here Pandian’s main argument on the issue.

Dalit Self and Brahminised ‘Other’

On August 27, 2003, the then chief minister of Tamil Nadu, J Jayalalithaa, well known for her tacit support of upper caste Hindu Right politics, instructed state officials to prevent the sacrifice of

I am grateful to C. Lakshmanan, C. Aloysius, Gopal Guru, D.L. Sheth, and A.R. Venkatachalapathy for their valuable comments on this article.

1 I refer to M.S.S. Pandian’s Dilemmas of Public Reason: Secularism and Religious Violence in Contemporary India, *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 28, 2005.

animals and birds in temples as part of the ritual sacrifice by lower castes for propitiating the gods. This injunction followed the sacrifice of 500 buffaloes in a village temple near the town of Tiruchi. The ex-chief minister, in the name of the Tamil Nadu Prevention of Cruelties to Animals Act, 1950, and its subsequent amendments, invoked the ban. Jayalalithaa's reason was overtly non-religious, and a matter of enforcing animal rights. Surprisingly, the ideological leftists opposed Jayalalithaa's move, claiming that her intervention in this regard was a step towards homogenising existing Hinduisms in the image of Brahminism, an agenda that is central to the Hindu Right's politics. Pandian notes the incongruity of the situation where a Hindu right ex-chief minister espoused secular reason and the left secularists defended irrationality or religiosity.

What is striking about Pandian's argument is that rationality, when viewed through the prism of caste, acquires a different dimension and lends itself to a different interpretation, even for secular-minded leftists. This is the reason why 'dalit rationality' is such a complex issue, both philosophically and politically, and why scholars often stumble over their own ideologies in this respect.

The Tamil Nadu experience has had precedents in other Indian states. State and public figures, in the case of the ban on ritual sacrifice, have made the sacrificial animal the commonsense limit of both rationalism and nationalism. They have thereby produced a civil nation around this limit, not simply by referring to the universal principles of rights that the practice violated, but by invoking complex emotional reactions about animal suffering caused by such practices as ritual sacrifice. The politics of emotional sentiment is critical to the formation of a national-popular collective will, as every political analyst from Nicolo Machiavelli to Antonio Gramsci has informed us. As one analyst puts it: "The phrase, 'such practices' acts to expand the field of shame and cast a pall over unnamed subaltern practices across spaces in which no national-popular collective will would be possible and over entire continents, where such practices are imagined to occur." Nevertheless, this kind of position is not sustainable today, with liberalism's re-evaluation of the principle of pluralism: "Liberal democratic societies are now haunted by the

spectre of mistaken intolerance. They now know that in time their deepest moral impulses may be exposed to be historically contingent, mere prejudices masquerading as universal principles.”²

In the postmodernist critique of modernity, the inevitable questions are: On what grounds, according to whom, is a practice a moral or a national limit of tolerance? And whose nation are we talking about? The contradictory demands the law places on indigenous, marginal, subaltern, dalit subjects, namely, that such persons re-orient their sensual, emotional, and corporeal identities towards the nation’s ideal image of itself as worthy of reverence and reconciliation, is a little short of preposterous, against the backdrop of present-day multicultural ideology.

This situation is not confined to India. The post Second World War optimism in ‘progressive’ values like democracy and secularism was belied – in progressive as well as reactionary ways — by political events taking place in different states and civil societies all over the world. In the 1970s, the USA saw the rise of the Christian Right, and Iran and later Nicaragua heralded a revolutionary form of religious activism in the form of Shi’ite Islam and Christian liberation theology, respectively. Against the secularist dogma of the wall of separation between politics and religion, religious (and even some non-religious) liberals and conservatives started conceding that religious values could have a place in the political process. (But equally, in a parallel movement, the divisiveness among religious groups, along with the process of secularisation, has lead to growing disenchantment with the traditional world-view.)³

In all these cases of religious activism, is religion being secularised or is politics being “sacralised”? According to many scholars of radical non-reason, to better understand popular movements we must bridge the disciplinary division between politics and religion, and conceptualise

2 The State of Shame: Australian Multiculturalism and the Crisis of Indigenous Citizenship by Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Cultural Inquiry*, Volume 24, Number 2, 1998, pages 577-578.

3 Dwight B. Billings and Shauna L. Scott discuss these issues in some detail in Religion and Political Legitimation, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 20, 1994.

political theology as a cultural field within which power relations are necessarily constricted. Apart from the existing chaotic developments in the relationship between religion and politics, there has been the added complication of caste as a social category in India. For many postmodernists, the dalit self has to be necessarily defined in radical alterity to its brahminised Other. And inevitably, there have been changes in perceptions regarding dalit rationality over the years. Early colonial studies on dalits maintained that they practised fewer and briefer Hindu ritual actions than higher castes, and that most dalits were inclined towards shamanism and possession by spirits. However, later liberal scholars have been at pains to prove that dalits or 'harijans' (sic) are as deeply religious as Brahmins.⁴

The aim of this essay is to argue that while postmodernists are justified in exposing the inability of the modern nation-state to completely respect 'Otherness', the use of the term 'radical alterity' or 'absolute Otherness' by extreme postmodernists to describe the 'situation' of dalit consciousness with respect to Brahmin consciousness is logically and philosophically incoherent. Furthermore, even in a political sense, it tends to obfuscate the progressive, emancipatory purpose of dalit movements today. Against Pandian, I would like to argue that it is possible today to be a secular rationalist *and* admit the existence of a plurality of views and customs, both rationalist and non-rationalist, within a polity. From this perspective, it is possible to delineate some progressive, even rationalist, strands in the religious systems of oppressed groups. This is why a critique of modernisation should not lead us to a rejection of modernity itself, as is the case with certain extreme forms of postmodernism.

The Modernist and Postmodernist Strands of Dalit Rationality

The debate over postmodernity has now transformed itself into a political question: Has the reforming impulse of modernity exhausted itself? Modernity is, above all, a process of secularisation, the slow

4 See Michael Moffat's Harijan religion: consensus at the bottom of caste, *American Ethnologist*, Volume 6, Number 2, 1979. I thank Dr. C. Lakshmanan for pointing out to me that the term 'Dalit Hindu' is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms.

transition from a received order to a produced order. Starting from itself, modern society has to create its own normative codes. And precisely because it is self-determined, this produced order can no longer claim any guarantee whatsoever, at least of a permanent kind. If the radical alterity of divine foundation – say, in the form of ritual animal sacrifice — previously evaded social conflicts by providing an unquestioned or unquestionable ‘outside’ reference point, the existing social order in modernity remains the subject of dispute. Not only are the rights of particular groups or individuals in question in modernity, but also the meaning and legitimacy of the new produced order itself is permanently questioned.

With no transcendental or ontological escape clause, modern society is inexorably self-referential – there is no ‘otherworldly’ or divine or ritualistic reference point for its existence. This explains modern society’s incessant attempts to give itself identity, as well as its defensive reaction to any threat to its self-image. Modern politics arises alongside this radical auto-referentiality. Secularisation transfers to politics the integrating function that religion previously fulfilled. If religion constituted the last instance on which all the manifestations of the given order were based, politics is now accorded a privileged position in the production of the modern social order.

The centrality of politics is seen to cause two problems. Firstly, the diversity of actually existing peoples, or the heterogeneity of society, seems to contradict the homogeneity that the concept of the rule of the people – or democracy — presupposes. Secondly, inasmuch as politics is only a partial aspect of life, can it represent life in its entirety? The reconciliation of the good, the true, and the beautiful, in the classical Kantian sense of rationality or reason, appears as an illusion of modernity. The disenchantment with this illusion is, in effect, postmodernity. In some instances, postmodernity is against modernisation, not against modernity, and the postmodern disenchantment is capable of renewing the reforming impulse of modernity.⁵ One strand of this ‘reforming impulse’ is witnessed in the problematisation of rationality in general, and of dalit rationality in

5 See, for more light on the subject, Norbert Lechner’s *A Disenchantment* called

particular. It comes closest to the concept of what I call “a pluralistic modernity”, and it is a position that I endorse. It also helps us see why progressive forms of religion, like liberation theology, can be an integral part of a pluralistic, modern, secular society. Most significantly, it makes modern secular societies accountable to and responsible for different socio-cultural groups.

In recent years, this problematisation has acquired the status of a political discourse in its own right, with all the attendant complications.⁶ The most elementary concept underpinning this discourse is that the vision a large part of the marginalized or dispossessed have of the world is a religious one. Nevertheless the discourse also comprises modern emancipatory notions like exteriority, utopia, and praxis. Community leaders among the marginalized are often both spiritual ministers and political organisers. Whether it is dalit Christianity or dalit Buddhism, there are some common radical and subversive features in each practice. In every context of dalit self-expression, the poor and the marginalized are able to ‘poach’ and ‘pilfer’ in ingenious ways the discourse of the dominant classes and to deploy it as a novel and powerful source of religious signification. It is important to note that self-interest (as in individual salvation) is not the only kind of interest at play in what is broadly called ‘dalit self-expression’. There is also a powerful urge towards concern with community, collective identity, and the dream of an alternative, less exploitative, more just, spiritual and social order.⁷

The ‘marginal’, then, emerges in this discourse as the condition of possibility of all social and cultural existence. This new ethics of marginality is necessarily decentred and plural, and constitutes the basis for a new Nietzschean freedom from moral injunction. Just as

Postmodernism, *Boundary 2*, Volume 20, Number 3, 1993, Duke University Press.

6 Sathiyathan Clarke, Eleanor Zelliot, James Massey, to name but a few scholars, have written extensively on this subject in the last decade or so.

7 See Hugo B. Urban’s *The Market-place and the Temple: Economic Metaphors and Religious Meanings in the Folk Songs of Colonial Bengal*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 60, Number 4, 2001.

some dalits and other backward castes today adopt the ritual practices of a radical anti-brahminism, say, in the form of animal sacrifice in temples, dalit Christians and Buddhists also buck the trend in mainstream religious practice. The need to vindicate God for allowing the existence of suffering among the dispossessed and to reconcile godly omnipotence with human impotence – this has been the problem of theodicy in all mainstream salvation religions, which look for solutions in doctrines like predestination, dualism, and karma. According to the ‘mainstream’ religious perspective, the world, such as it is, is the product of human evil and error, and, in the face of its essential sinfulness, humanity has little recourse other than submission to divine power and authority.

Many dalit theorists would have a different take on salvation. They reject the Hindu cyclical world-view and endorse a historical – or what I would call ‘secularised’ — perspective of life. Dalit Christian theology, for its part, began by accepting Marxian analytical tools. Suffering and pain – comprising a wounded psyche — constitute a major part of dalit Christian theology. As Western feminist theologian Sharon Welch points out in another context related to subaltern religious studies, without a suspicious edge, liberation theology’s affirmations of emancipation and justice lose their ‘groundedness’ in concrete situations.⁸ Of the two strains of Christianity, one is the theology centred on the image of the crucifixion, which rejects the body, mystifies violence, and valorises abstraction. The other is the minority Christian viewpoint – a Utopian view that valorises the body and community in light of the promise of resurrection. The latter is the sensual and corporeal view of Christianity and finds a resonance in dalit liberation theology. Now caste, rather than class, is seen as the sole source of dalit suffering. Here, the Christian God, the Father, is a dalit God, and Jesus, the Saviour Son, is also a dalit.

In a more general sense, the deity of liberation theology is a figure that has given up absolute power in a sequence of historical covenants

8 Quoted in Tom Moylan’s Denunciation/Annunciation: The Radical Methodology of Liberation Theology, *Cultural Critique*, Number 20, 1991, University of Minnesota Press, Pages 59-60.

with humanity.⁹ In the first covenant, God relinquishes arbitrary authority and becomes a partner with humanity. In giving up domination, God eliminates the law, and ceases to impose divine will on humans. With the second, the human being becomes sovereign, and God's will and the liberation of humanity coincide. God remains as the signifier of an Otherness that empowered humanity to reach beyond its own limits – that is, the hoped-for achievement *beyond* the limits of necessity. Indeed, the Indian Christian dalit community largely accepts the modernist B.R. Ambedkar's solution of separating themselves from the Hindu caste system.

Ambedkar also exercises considerable influence on other dalit communities. In the south and west of India, dalits have adopted the spiritual ideology of 'pre-Aryanism', namely, Buddhism. In contrast, in north India, it would seem that dalit theology has taken a backseat and state policies are more or less the starting point of the whole process of political subversion.¹⁰ In western India, there have been mass conversions of dalits to Buddhism since 1956. To a great extent, conversion to Buddhism has meant psychological liberation to many dalits. Presently, dalits seem to be moving towards a more socially-engaged Buddhism.

Dalit Buddhism can be considered a popular religion not because it is less rational or ethical than doctrinal religions – indeed, it may be even more so, and some have even called it non-religion — but because it has been constituted in the context of popular struggle, and it defines its adherents in opposition to the dominant culture, and provides them with a new identity. For Ambedkar, Buddhist *dukkha* (sorrow or anguish) is related to exploitation and poverty. Like other forms of liberation theology, Ambedkar's Buddhism indicts the powerful and the privileged for the inequality and sufferings of society,

9 What follows is a summary of Franz J. Hinkelammert's argument in *The Ideological Weapons of Death: A Theological Critique of Capitalism*, translated by Phillip Berryman, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1986.

10 This is Christophe Jaffrelot's observation in Sanskritisation vs. Ethnization in India: Changing Identities and Caste Politics before Mandal, *Asian Survey*, Volume 40, Number 5, 2000, University of California Press.

views the poor as the victims of exploitation, and calls for the elimination of suffering through social action. For liberation theologians the world over, sin, suffering, salvation, are all defined in political terms. As social and spiritual goals coincide, the poor see salvation as the elimination of political and economic suffering through collective action against the structures of power. Inherent to this perspective is the acknowledgement of the necessity of constructive violence.¹¹

As Daniel H. Levine points out, liberation theology is more a symbolic banner than a rigorous corpus of ideas.¹² There are several points to be kept in mind while discussing liberation theology – and these are admittedly controversial. First, issues raised by liberation theology do not constitute the exclusive domain of intellectuals. Second, liberation theology is not a movement in the narrow sense of the term. It is part of a larger process that has spurred churches to press for new issues and break longstanding ties with power and privilege. Third, the assumption that politics and religion are separate must be set aside. Fourth, the historical dimension is essential. That is to say, history involves not only documenting past events, but also understanding that change is a constant in human life. Thus liberation theology necessarily views the state as being dominating and totalitarian.

Within the Church itself, Latin American theologians have moved toward the liberation paradigm through their *critique* of the existential theology of post-war Europe and the pastoral practices of the New Christendom. Why is this critique of existential theology relevant and necessary, as far as theologians from the Third World are concerned? In order to answer this question, it is important to understand the nature of existential theology.

Existential theology – informed by the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Hans-

11 For a comprehensive analysis of the subject of dalit Buddhism, see Janet A. Contursi's *Political Theology: Text and Practice in a Dalit Panther Community*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 52, Number 2, 1993.

12 How not to understand Liberation Theology, or Nicaragua, or Both, *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, Volume 32, Number 3, 1990.

Georg Gadamer – extended the trajectory that the earlier liberal theology had been following since the end of the 19th century, as it moved from an Other-worldly, God-centred perspective to a human-centred one. Progressive theologians in France legitimised Marxism, while in Germany they came under the influence of the Frankfurt School. Drawing on Jurgen Habermas, they described the role of the Church in actively involving itself in this process through a fresh assessment of its place in the secular public sphere. This Christian version of liberal humanism allowed theologians to take seriously the realm of everyday life in the secular world and to abandon the traditional split between the supernatural and the natural.

In particular, the Third World liberal theologians saw that – despite the privileging of human existence in this world – existential theology did not speak directly to Third World people. For one thing, existential theology is unmarked by class, race, or gender, and unaffected by any concrete social interests or ideological commitments. For another, the older progressive theology is Eurocentric, too abstract, favours individual rights and privileges social democracy.¹³ In contrast, the new liberation theology is concerned with the interests of the marginalized and subaltern groups, especially in the developing world. In fact, at its best, liberation theology is more political and progressive than existential theology.

The basic principle that guides liberation theology in all its variants, namely, Latin American, African, Asian, is that of marginality. Marginality is a concept that straddles modernity and postmodernity; it can operate as exclusion in the former and as singularity in the latter. On the one hand, liberal pluralism calls for the co-existence of the marginal with the mainstream; on the other, the extreme postmodernist tactician wishes to preserve marginality and reject the mainstream. How does the extreme postmodernist ‘preserve’ marginality? The answer, in a word, is: by taking recourse to the concept of ‘radical alterity’ or absolute Otherness, and thereby short-

13 Denunciation/Annunciation: The Radical Methodology of Liberation Theology by Tom Moylan, *Cultural Critique*, Number 20, 1991, University of Minnesota Press.

circuiting the process of dialogue between the powerful and the powerless, between the religious and the secular-political. The philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, more than any other, has discussed the term, 'radical alterity', at length. As to how the employment of this term ultimately goes against the grain of the very rationale of progressive and emancipatory liberation movements, by emphasising the religious, rather than the political, aspects of the struggle between the powerful and the powerless, is the burden of my song below.

Levinas's Unlimited Obligation and the Postmodernist Dilemma

At least since Immanuel Kant, one of the principal concerns of ethical theory has been to determine the forms and limits of moral obligation.¹⁴ A Kantian views moral commitments as having a beginning and an end. A duty or obligation would be something specific whose origin can be traced, whose object can be determined and whose manner of execution or discharge can be specified. In contrast to the Kantian limited obligation, we have, in Emmanuel Levinas, the theory of unlimited obligation, which is an alternative to liberal individualistic ethics. Levinas's writings are of great interest to extreme postmodernist liberation theologians. I attempt to apply these ideas to the critique of dalit rationality and its postmodernist strand – though, obviously, Levinas does not do so himself.

Levinas's obligation is unlimited, not only in the sense that we – in this case, the upper caste representatives of the Indian state and civil society — are obligated without having consciously placed ourselves under obligations, but also in the sense that our very effort to discharge them only increases our commitments. What Levinas is claiming is that our responsibility is a permanent fact about ourselves. Since our responsibility has never been consciously assumed, it can never be discharged. Any person other than 'my self' has an absolute moral

14 In what follows, I depend heavily on Roland Paul Blum's excellent discussion of Emmanuel Levinas's Totality and Infinity in Emmanuel Levinas' Theory of Commitment, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume XLIV, Number 2, December 1983.

claim upon me. It is only on the basis of a highly original view of the self and its relations to others that Levinas is able to make such impressive claims for morality.¹⁵ As we see below, Levinas's perspective is radically different from other philosophers', like G.W.F. Hegel or Martin Heidegger.

Levinas attacks Totality as the reduction of the 'Other' to the same. He rejects the *solipsistic* view of totality, because, in this perspective, the Other (*l'autre*) or the Other person (*l'autrui*) is robbed of her individuality and her unique characteristics by being understood or approached only on the Self's own terms. (This also constitutes an analogy with the postmodernist's critique of the Indian modernist nation-state, which is believed to reduce the heterogeneity of its citizens to an upper caste, brahminical, homogenised totality.) Equally, Levinas eschews the interpretation of Totality as *contextual*, because here both the Self and the Other are seen as aspects of the total dialectical system of explanation – almost in a Hegelian mode of synthesis (and attempt at reconciliation) – which Levinas abhors. Another thinker attacked by Levinas is Heidegger, who is accused of treating persons as merely occasions for the revelation of Being, thereby depriving them of any reality of their own. According to Levinas, ontology, as first philosophy, is a philosophy of power. Essentially, the power and violence involved is that of reducing the 'Other' to the 'same'.¹⁶

Levinas, then, consistently opposes philosophical systems that deprive individuals (say, the dalits) of their peculiarities, in order to absorb them into a system of thought or in the flow of history or in some other kind of 'Totality'. The 'Other' is an expression of 'Infinity', of that which, precisely, escapes contextual or solipsistic Totality. Following Rene Descartes, Levinas claims that, in thinking Infinity, we think more than is contained in thought. The 'more than' is transcendence, that which *has* — beyond any structure or Totality. In the idea of the Infinite, one thinks *that* which always remains external to thought. This is the basic theme of *Totality and Infinity*: the overcoming of solipsism as the process that generates 'Infinity'

or unlimited obligation of the Self (say, of the brahminised Indian state) to the Other (say, the marginalized dalit community).¹⁷

The point, however, is that Descartes was referring to God, and not to an abstract notion like Infinity. But Levinas does not clearly distinguish between Descartes's idea of God which renders solipsism as being untenable (because God cannot be contained within the Self's thinking-about-Infinity) and Edmund Husserl's argument in the Fifth Cartesian Mediation that it is only in the monadic Self's experience of other egos that it finds a guarantee of an objective world. In other words, we are not sure if Levinas's unlimited obligation is to God or to other persons (or egos). Similarly, Levinas's endorsement of Soren Kierkegaard's analysis of faith in the Christian God as the only way in which the Self can overcome itself, leads to another problematic confusion – that of the ethical with the religious.¹⁸ The religious underpinning, then, introduces into Levinas's work the concept of 'Christian guilt' and 'sin' by the back door!

For Levinas, the Other (say, the dalit community) forces the Self (say, the brahminised Indian state) to see itself as fundamentally 'unjustified' and 'detestable' and brings it back to its 'ultimate reality'. Given Levinas's endorsement of Kierkegaardian faith in God, this becomes more than a moral question; it is a religious one. The Self (or the Indian state) acknowledges itself to be fundamentally *guilty* before the Other (or the dalit community). The Self is transformed from a solitary aesthete, preoccupied with enjoyment, into a being whose essence is constituted by its commitment to the Other.¹⁹

Thus the Levinasian Self's relation to the Other is a religious one and reminiscent of the Kierkegaardian knight of faith's relation to God. According to Levinas, the Self and the Other would not be caught in a Totality, because the relation between them is not reciprocal

17 Ibid., Pages 149-150.

18 Ibid., pp. 150-151. This is also the basis of Jacques Derrida's critique of Levinas. For an elaboration of this theme, see Roland Paul Blum's *Deconstruction and Creation, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume XLVI, Number 2, December 1985.

19 Ibid., Page 163.

and no synthesis, in the Hegelian sense, occurs. Justifiably sceptical of the Hegelian tendency to absorb the individual wholly into his context, Levinas attempts to save both the Self and the Other by placing the barrier of 'separateness' between them. He thereby, however, denies them any worldly link and is only able to explain their relation in somewhat religious categories – possibly as a reaction against Kantian individualism, which is based on a system of rights guaranteed by the state.

As one critic points out: "The Other, indeed, demands everything of me. *But where are the Other's obligations to me?* They are never mentioned. Here the analogy between the Other and God is clear, for one does not talk of God's obligations to man. Were God to have obligations, He would be merely another man, for He would be caught in a network of reciprocal relations", as are Sartrean individuals. "If the Other is not to remain a mere feature of my consciousness, he must originate independently of my world, in a way analogous to God. Should the Other, either as a simple person or, as a representative of all humanity, ever be the object of unlimited commitments? Is not a person, under such conditions, threatened with an oppression, a violence just as great as any Levinas wishes to avoid by constructing his attack against 'Totality'?"²⁰

Levinas's protest, and indeed that of the extreme postmodernist, is based on a stringent critique of the very roots of the destruction of human dignity – the Logocentrism or the priority of reason, logic, idea, concept, and the categories of immanence that pervade the Western philosophical tradition, the main culprits being Egotatry, Totality, History, horror of the Other. For Levinas, the Other is appreciated precisely as Other, in her radical alterity and irreducible singularity – the Other is not an object of Knowledge. Thought must renounce its totalitarian *hubris*. The Other is approachable only ethically, only in heeding the categorical imperative that comes to us not from the general notion of persons as ends in themselves (as Kant would have it), but from the face of the singular Other that

“opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation”, challenging me to justify my freedom and even my existence.²¹

Specific philosophical problems arise when we try to apply Levinas’s notion of ‘radical alterity’ as a relation between the upper caste, brahminised, homogenising Indian state and the marginalized dalit community. Without reciprocity in the Sartrean sense, this relationship becomes a religious, not an ethical, one, and one based on ‘guilt’ rather than a sense of ‘justice’. Moreover, in this relationship, there is no hope of reconciliation. For this ‘religious’ relationship to persist, both the ‘guilt’ and the ‘marginality’ must be eternally preserved. What takes a backseat here is the politics of and for change. Little wonder, then, that the extreme postmodernist’s enemy number one is the secular modernist!

The unpacking of the concept of ‘radical alterity’ to its logical conclusion reveals its affinity to older traditions in Christian theology, rather than to the more progressive liberation (or even existentialist) theology, which privileges exteriority, utopia, and especially praxis — the political dimension of ‘liberation’ — in the case of the marginalized. There is, no doubt, a more radical interpretation of Levinas’s perspective, which will draw us out of this impasse. If one were to consistently deconstruct the concept of ‘radical alterity’, one may end up eliminating both Self and Other, reducing them to a system of signs, as in Jacques Derrida. However, it would then be difficult to understand on what basis one could construct an ethic or a philosophy of moral commitment. It should seem obvious that only selves, not signs, can be responsible or morally committed. Deconstructionist techniques seem to lead us necessarily to the ‘trace’ or the *differance* as the true ‘subjects’ of philosophical analysis. Where in this domain, is there room for ‘self’-reflection on ethical issues?²²

21 The phrase is from Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* and quoted in Toward a Dialectic of Totality and Infinity: Reflections on Emmanuel Levinas by Anselm Kyongsuk Min, *The Journal of Religion*, Volume 78, No. 4, 1998, Page 574.

22 Deconstruction and Creation by Roland Paul Blum, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Volume XLVI, Number 2, December 1985.

According to the extreme postmodernist critique of modernity, dalit discourses, desires and practices should always pose a potential challenge to the nation and its core institutions and values such as 'democracy' and 'universal justice'. This critique is likely to end up arguing in favour of conserving the marginality of dalit and other lower caste groups and thereby to freeze their cultural identities. Under *postmodernism*, everything is marginal, so the margin can no longer serve a critical function; under *modernism*, marginality can only be partial and temporary. In a more ideal setting in late modern liberal understandings of multiculturalism, the state apparatuses as well as its laws, principles of governance, and national attitudes, need to be radically transformed to accommodate others. Alterity need not be seen as a threat or challenge to self and national coherence, but could be seen, instead, as compatible with an incorporative project, an invitation to absorption into the national body politic. The state's public discourse consists of inviting the different segments in civil society to enter history anew, and participate in a refreshed and cleansed version of a new, more open-ended form of nationalism. Furthermore, for the modernist, marginality is not confined to the poor and dispossessed. There are indeed various modes of bucking the system, and even the elite rip the system, as is evident in the recent stock market scam.²³

In the register of modernity, marginality is inherently unstable and cannot be viewed as a primary value. This indeed is the problem of philosophical incoherence while employing the term 'radical alterity' in the critique of dalit rationality. It would help if the postmodern critique operated against modernisation, not against modernity, and if the postmodern disenchantment were politically capable of renewing the liberating, utopian impulse of modernity. This would also aid the process of retaining pluralism within an overarching secular, modernist framework. Every time there is an incident such as ritual animal sacrifice, with the participation of the dalit and other lower caste groups, it need not be viewed as a perceived threat to modernity or secular nationhood.

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23 My main reference here is George Yudice's *Marginality and the Ethics of Survival*, *Social Text*, Number 21, 1989, Duke University Press.

Female Body – A Site of Knowledge

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The writer is a Research Associate, Asian Centre for Cross Cultural Studies, Chennai. In this article on embodying knowledge, she critiques the system of knowledge that has been the monopoly of male for centuries. In the first part, while locating the body in general, she investigates how women's knowledge has been excluded from the history of knowledge, be it philosophical or any other domain for that matter. The second part of the article explores the possibilities of negotiating female body as a site of knowledge.

Locating the Body in the System of Knowledge

The legacy of Plato's distinction between soul and body, Christianity's identification of the body as the repository of sin, and Cartesian dualism have had a vital impact on Western systems of thought. Though there have been distinct periods in Western development which have emphasized the contribution of all the senses to knowledge acquisition and meaning making,¹ mind and body are reified as discrete entities.

In the Cartesian view of the world² the eye becomes the privileged medium of communication about self and of knowledge production

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- 1 For instance, sensory experience in medieval Europe was seen as vital to the acquisition of knowledge and mysticism in its disparate forms was open to sensory experiences of many varieties.
 2. Vision is privileged as the primary sense that connects the self to the physical and material environment in which it is located.

through empirical observation. Still, it had established an ontological distinction between mind and body that privileged the former over the latter thus leading to an outlook of the mind as an object or essence, which is discrete from the physical body. Hence, a philosophical dualism between mind and body, between an isolated, rational self and a world external to him or her, formed the basis of mainstream Western epistemology and has informed the development of scientific knowledge. Since the development of knowledge was in large part premised on this legacy, the body became comparatively a trivial topic for inquiry of knowledge.

Nonetheless, from 1980, by the impact of the writings of feminists, social and cultural anthropologists, the subject of body began to acquire the status of a substantial field, for instance, Turner noted in *Body and Society* (1984) how, while the embodiment of human beings seems central to social production and reproduction, only few social theorists have taken the embodiment of persons seriously.³ Freund made a note that sociology which is supposed to be a discipline concerned with living and breathing human beings, it has rarely acknowledged the significance of the human body in its writing.⁴ Having realised the tension between the body as a necessary precondition for all possible practices and its apparent absence from sociological theory, Shilling⁵ also made a remark on the body as being both present and absent within the disciplinary frame. Contrast to this, the Foucauldian optic has been developed to address the relation between the body as an object of regulation and as a constituent of agency. In consequence, the body became implicitly central to the analysis of many areas of social experience, such as health, disease, self- presentation, beauty and sexuality. However, in the last quarter

3 Cf. Bryan Turner, *The Body and Society: Exploration in Social Theory* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 37.

4 Cf. P.Freund, *The Civilised Body: Social Domination, Control and Health* (Philadelphia. PA: Temple University Press, 1982); 'Understanding Socialised Human Nature,' *Theory and Society*, 17 (1988): 839-64.

5 Cf. Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage publications, 1993).

of the 20th century the body has acquired greater significance within every discipline of human sciences and the body is more present today than absent.

Yet, in all these, very little reference was made to the body as a taken-for-granted background to social agency and action.⁶ For instance, there was very little attempt made to explore the relationship between body and agency, the productive capabilities of the body or the phenomenology of how people experience the "lived body".

One thing that has prompted this new interest in the body is uniquely and reflexively responsive to social and political changes. The influx of new technologies such as gene therapy or xeno-transplantation challenge key assumptions about the human body concerning what is possible and ethically justified in terms of medical and technical intervention. Changes in forms of social organization have generated corresponding changes in the meaning of the body as well as changing relationships between the human and non-human world that have fostered a process of politicization to which the experience of body is central.

Undeniably, interest in the human body is also a reflection of the expansion of the knowledge itself and its openness to the intellectual currents connected with post-structuralism, psychoanalysis and contemporary feminist theory. These currents converge on the body as a site at the interface between the biological and the social, the collective and the individual, structure and agency, etc.

Negation and Refutation of Women's Knowledge

The exclusion of woman's knowledge can be understood as a question of silencing. A blank denial of their claim to subjectivity is visibly seen down the centuries. For instance, the history of knowledge excludes women by silencing them, either by refusing them entry or by refusing to listen to those who have, through whatever means, managed to gain access to its privileged domain, or by disqualifying it as no knowledge.

6 There were exceptions to this, within medical sociology and the social history of medicine and specific courses dedicated to the body. Cf. Lupton, 1994, 22.

A careful reading of the metaphors that structure philosophical texts from Plato to Freud divulges a systematic exclusion of women from the production of knowledge. In Plato's world, woman is not a subject who can think or speak. Plato's parable of the cave, the fecund womb from which all Western philosophy derives its inspiration, is the metaphor that initiates this silencing of woman. It is both an ideological and rhetorical device that structures femininity as the marginal and unacknowledged support of the philosophical enterprise.

It was evident in the history that the equation of rationality with masculinity was totalised and this equation allowed no space for the feminine *Other*. For instance, Lucy Irigaray argues that philosophy partially establishes "woman" in the very act of exiling her to the place of the *Other*. Furthermore, the voices of women inside philosophy have historically been the voices of the faithful disciples or dutiful daughters of the father's or wife's or the lover's wisdom.

This is important because if we are able to understand silencing / denial of knowledge as a complex series of strategies aimed at denying women their role knowledge subjects. Moreover the complicating factor is that the power imbalances between women and men are not just limited to system of knowledge, but are part of a much larger social construction of gender relations. Defining a body of knowledge reinforces the exclusivity and power held by the users of that knowledge, which may in turn develop and reshape other bodies of knowledge. It is men who have the power to define and decide what "counts" as knowledge. Religion had been sanctioning this power to men through its sacred scriptures. Negating or dis-qualifying women's knowledge as no-knowledge had been one of the strategies of the male supremacy to colonise the power of knowledge of women down the centuries.

Feminist thinking and Knowledge Systems

By the influx of feminist thinking, many writers and scholars in India had begun to address women's concerns and engaged in feminist politics. They had developed their research under the aegis of the grassroots-oriented banner. The period from the seventies to the mid-eighties witnessed a range of activist-oriented research and writing

that dealt directly with women's experiences of political subordination and economic exploitation. Its early publications provided an important platform for statistical and empirical information as well as analytical and doctrinal commentary on gender oppression and justice. Other publications disseminated information about women's experiences of exploitation and oppression, with much of this writing dealing with, women in offices, domestic workers and women in unorganised sectors. The tendency was therefore to record how women bore the main brunt of an economically and politically unjust system, rather than to explore why this was the case by unpacking gender dynamics in relation to patriarchy.

While the eighties marked an explosion of gender research, relatively few women have played an active role in the production of critical knowledge. One of the reasons for this is that women had extremely limited social and educational opportunities for acquiring skills in comparison with men. Writing by women in the late eighties and early nineties was mainly autobiographical. Feminist scholarship and politics have long valued this genre as a source of women's knowledge. However, in hierarchical system of knowledge production, women's autobiography has tended to be subordinated as "expression" of experience, rather than as a form of autonomous knowledge production. The vantage points and politics implicit in women's autobiographies and life histories have therefore often been regarded as very peripheral in relation to men scholars' historical, sociological or literary interpretations. Given the marginalization of women's personal narratives within the academic domain and the paucity of women scholars in India, there was little evidence of a body of knowledge production.

However, very few feminist writings intricately attempted to disentangle power relations between men and women. These texts explored not only ways in which women have been dominated, silenced and sexually exploited, but also ways in which ordinary women had directly and indirectly resisted their subordination. For example, the emergence of Taslima Nasrin's feminist writings was crucial in foregrounding the unique style of her challenge and intervention against male domination within a specifically Bangladeshi context.

Bama's *karrukku* (a Tamil novel) is an important reminder that dalit women's struggles for self-expression are very different from those of many privileged women. Based on Bama's own life experiences as an aspiring writer, the story describes the efforts of an independent young dalit woman to realise her desire to write and to resist her class, caste and gendered discrimination. In a sense, the story responds to what is seen as the universality of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* by illustrating that women's experiences are highly differentiated, and that struggles for creative expression among poor and racially persecuted women will always differ from those of privileged women.

More recent work in feminist knowledge has advanced the critique of an empiricist notion of experience in the name of a much more complex understanding of women's lives. Sandra Harding contends that taking women's lives as the foundation for knowledge is premised on the claim that women's lives are necessarily multiple and contradictory.⁷ Acknowledging this, Harding argues that feminists need to replace the desire for unity around women's common experiences with political solidarity based on goals shared with other groups struggling against patriarchal hegemony.⁸

This is not merely to add new knowledge from the experiences of marginalized groups to the dominant culture, but to disrupt the limits of legitimate knowledge. Although being a woman doesn't guarantee oppositional knowledge, there is the logic of pluralism by default as the basis for knowledge. It is an advantage to base knowledge in the everyday lives of oppressed and excluded groups. Indeed, a constitutive element for the formulations of feminism is that they start their analysis from the day-to-day lives of women. Hence to count as a feminist knowledge, it must be located in the lives of women.

7 Cf. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (New York: Cornell University press, 1991), 173-81; *Whose Science ? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991).

8 Cf. Sandra Harding, ed. *Feminism and methodology: Social Science Issues* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991).

The authority for feminist knowledge lies not in women's authentic experiences of their lives but in 'the subsequently articulated observations and theory about the rest of nature and social relations - observations and theory that start out from, that look at the world from the perspective of women's lives'⁹.

However any stable notion of identity as the basis for feminist knowledge, even as it details the actual situation of women in terms of their integration or exploitation into the world system of production/reproduction and communication called the informatics of domination¹⁰ should be shunned.

Embodying Knowledge

We now move the discussion to the next level that is to reconstruct the power-knowledge structures where the body becomes a location of knowledge. Body, 'is most discussed, imagined, prescribed and proscribed, disfigured, disguised and disciplined surface in the physical world'¹¹ not only by the media and the medical profession, but by the social, cultural and the religious. The human body becomes a site of inscription in almost all human interactions. The bodies have been attributed meaning, and they can be read by others. They are texts, written and rewritten carrying knowledgeability and power.

The concept of the 'lived body' accentuates embodiment as a site of knowledge and redirects sociological attention from the body as a reified object towards the ways in which the body is lived. This shift is described as one towards an experientially grounded view of human embodiment as the existential basis of our being-in-the-world draws on feminist insights as well as aspects of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment. The concept of the lived body (or embodied experience) affirms materiality and directs analytical focus on tacit knowledge or gut feelings¹² that stand in contrast to rational reflective

9 Cf. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, 1991, 124.

10 Cf. Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto", in Simians, *Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 82.

11 Cf. Nicholas J. Fax, *Postmodernism, Sociology and Health* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994), 25.

knowledge. The concept of lived / embodied experience not only operates as a phenomenological counter to abstract theory, but also on a political level as a challenge to orthodox forms of knowledge.

The body's participation in the production of narrative, the construction of collectivity, the articulation of the unconscious, the generation of post-coloniality, and the economies of gender and expression, contours new relations between history and memory, aesthetics and politics.¹³ Moreover, the concept of embodied experience privileges the idea 'truth' of the body exists, though it has been subdued by process of patriarchy. When the subaltern(ized) speaks, s/he, causes violence to the episteme of the dominant power both by the very fact of her/his articulation, and by posing a new knowledge contestory to the dominant one.

Academic Feminism and Corporeality

Bordo (1993) notes that the female body has rarely been the focus of feminist theory nor have feminists contributed to the wider social scientific project to theorise the body. However, in the past two decades, there has been a move in feminism towards an interest in the body as a social and cultural site. Consequently, there has been a proliferation of feminist texts that seek to theorise the female body. Though some of the feminists have expressed uneasiness about the project of theorising the body and have argued for ways of refocusing on 'lived experience', others have vigorously perceived the body as an object of theoretical inquiry. This latter project has been undoubtedly driven by philosophy and feminist concerns in order to re-shape social and political theory more generally. Consequently, feminist debate has discernibly shifted from material body struggles that involve concerns about reproductive and sexual control towards efforts to ensure the bodies inclusion in theory. This also paved way for women to 'reclaim' their bodies from male control and abuse. Using the body as vehicle of political action and protest, feminist analysis of women's

12 Cf. Burgitt, *Bodies of Thought* (London: Sage publications, 1999), 149.

13 Cf. Alexandra Howson, *Embodying Gender* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

oppression brought the body into academic conceptualizations of patriarchy. This feminist focus on the embodied existence of women did more than highlighting the multiple ways in which bodies were implicated in social relations of inequality and oppression. Analysis of the sex/gender, nature/culture and biology/society divisions began to break down, or at least reduce the strength of some of the corporeal boundaries which popular and academic thought had posited between 'women' and 'men.' Indeed, feminist scholarship problematized the very nature of the terms 'woman' and 'man', 'female' and 'male', and 'femininity' and 'masculinity', by questioning the ontological bases of sexual difference.

Female Embodiment – Reservoir of Knowledge

Miss S. Hadfield, in her *Letters on the Importance of the Female Sex: With Observations on their Manners and Education* (1803) writes, "Men have indeed too long thought it an advantage to consign the Fair Sex to ignorance that, by a monopoly of knowledge, their superiority might be supported."¹⁴ The elimination of women from the system of knowledge has been inextricably bound to their bodies – to their procreative role in society and to societal perceptions of their relative physical, intellectual and emotional inferiority and frailty.

By the impact of feminist thinking, to a certain extent, women have attempted to free themselves from the shackles of traditional confinements. They have gone in search of an identity, an autonomous self and this search has begun with the body.¹⁵ According to the French feminists, the body is the source of knowledge. For example, Helene Cixous insists that "woman must write her body...her body must be heard." Madeleine Gagnon argues that "all women have to do is to let the body flow, from the inside", to move from a state of unconscious excitation directly to a written female text." Indeed, for some feminists: 'all feminist thinking might be described as an

14 As cited in Ashley Montagu, *The Natural Superiority of Women* (London: Altamira Press, 1999), 84-5.

15 Cf. Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (London: Routledge, 1992); Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

engagement of one sort or another, with what it means to be, and to be perceived to be, a female body.'¹⁶ Thus a new revolutionary strategy for taking power has proceeded via a new definition of the politics of the body. A number of feminists are beginning to give primacy to the biological body as the source of knowledge. Women bring to academia the knowledge derived from the 'lived experiences' of their body. Lived experiences are endowed with a certain meaning. An experience is anything lived or undergone; a meaning is an interpretation, adding significance to the experience undergone. Thus the lived bodily experiences of women become the very source of knowledge. This challenges the very normativity of knowledge which pre-supposes reason as the criteria for knowledge. Here below we give some of the knowledge derived from the bodily experiences of women.

Wonder of the Womb

The miracle of female body is a self-revealing work that turns the light on and shows that women have valuable things to say, outstanding words to share, and eternal wisdom to give. Female body is the creative potential of the universe. It is also a harbinger of new, powerful and harmonious human identity. There is wonder, mystery and awe in the amazing processes and systems in a woman's body. And the most amazing processes happen in the womb. Exploration of the ways of the womb can be a path to wonder and value human life when the existence of human life is threatened, denied and made redundant. Through the womb of woman, all life comes into being and in her body are the seeds of all that has been and all that can be. Women are beginning to realize that their womb is a carrier of life. Reproductive system is the seat of her primal energy and her most powerful force.

Awe of Menstruation

Menarche is a perceptible symbol of sexual maturity. Yet, from an early age females have been conditioned to believe that

16 Cf. Barbara Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London, New York: Longman, 1999), 2.

menstruation is a curse and a handicap. This alienation from patriarchal religion has been leading them to a feeling of disconnection with the wondrous processes they embody. Feminists reject the language that labels menstruating women, unclean. Having fought for the power to take control of their own bodies, they now seek ways to celebrate them by interpreting it from their own experiences.

Feminists have brought to light the knowledge from their experience that menstruation is neither mysterious nor malignant but a perfectly healthy, normal function of women. Blood is the symbol of life which women shed month after month for the continuation of Human race. This 'discharge' of blood from a woman's body is necessary when the woman's body goes through changes in preparation of the womb to receive and nurture new life. Shedding of blood of woman becomes an indispensable event in the human history for the arrival of new generations.

Splendour of Birthing

Women have an intimate relationship with life and its processes: birthing, nurturing, life-sustenance. In many cultures pregnancy, birthing and nursing are interpreted by both sexes as handicapping experiences; as a consequence women have been made to feel that by virtue of their biological functions they have been naturally placed in an inferior position to men.¹⁷ Moreover, this attitude is also divinely sanctioned that labour and childbirth shall be hazards and painful for women. In Genesis 3:16 we read, 'that God said unto the woman, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children."' Hence, pregnancy, from a conscious male viewpoint appears to be handicapping experience for a woman, placing her in an inferior position. This was also one of the reasons for infant and maternal mortality rates which were quite high in earlier days.

From the perspective of women, pregnancy is neither precarious nor handicapping rather empowering. Despite its discomforts and inconveniences, women experience pregnancy and child birth as

17 Childbirth was enveloped in so many myths, mysteries, and dangers that most women have until recently approached or experienced the event with fear and anxiety.

something miraculous and supernatural and woman as the giver of life, sustenance, warmth and caring. Birthing is an epiphany, a manifestation of woman's mystery and supernatural art, the most powerful and creative living presences. The internal location of the reproductive organs does not lend itself to easy exploration and many people, even today, remain ignorant of the reasons for the periodic bodily changes women experience.

The first fascinating mystery is how a pregnancy gets started. After conception, the zygote announces its presence. If not, it will be washed away in a flood of menstrual blood. The zygote does this by aggressively attacking and eroding the lining of the uterus. It stops only when it is practically in contact with the mother's blood stream. Once the zygote makes contact with the wall of the uterus, it begins dumping huge quantities of human Chorionic Gonadotropin (hCG) into her system. When the mother-to-be detects a little of this hormone, she responds by cranking up her estrogen production and decreasing her prostaglandin production. When her system gets too much hCG, she gets morning sickness. The excess hCG also spills over into the woman's urine. It is hCG that is recognized by those home pregnancy test kits.

Why zygotes evolved this way is curious mystery. What evolutionary advantage might there be to making one's host violently ill every morning? Perhaps it is a not so subtle signal to the mother that she is not in charge anymore. For the rest of her life she will have an invisible umbilical cord to that child, intensely feeling whatever that child feels. Her emotions will never be her own again. No anti-bacterial soaps or disinfectant sprays can hope to keep them at bay. Because there is such a thin barrier between the placenta and the mother's blood stream, the growing foetus is in danger of being detected as an intruder that must be eliminated. Metabolic wastes, foetal blood cells and bits of placenta that cross the boundary between them could arouse the mother's immune system's suspicion. It's almost as if the foetus must camouflage itself, as if it must chemically hide in the womb.

The more scientists study the intricate complexity of the womb, the more amazing pregnancy becomes. From the crafty drive to

procreate, to the foetal takeover of the womb, the great knowledge brought to the academia is how the processes and systems of life take hold of us and drive us. In the end, life doesn't seem to be ultimately concerned with our personal preferences. Life wants to move through us, survive and thrive. The rhythm of life follows its own powerful and mysterious beat in the mystery of womb. New life comes into the world through the womb. Women have the honour of allowing life to gestate within their body. Participation in creation is one of the most holy and meaningful privileges of existence. Women's experience of the pregnancy and birth, have an impact on generations to come.

The enchanting feeling of those first unmistakable flutters of movement bring excitement and joy - even if later her bladder gets a kick or two at the most inconvenient moments. And then there is the profound feeling of participating bodily in the creation of a new human being. No matter what great things a man accomplishes in his life. There will be nothing greater than what man does with his body can match the creative power growing in the womb. Pregnancy is first and foremost a woman's mystery.¹⁸

Bodily Sensitivity

Women are mostly close to their bodies. This closeness gives them a kind of bodily awareness leading them to sensitivity to such an extent that they can not only sense physical changes, but also the flow of subtle energy. Sensitivity to and understanding the signs of her body's functioning are an antidote to every woman's confidence. Besides, this enables them to be sensitive not only to their body but also to other bodies.

In a scientific research made, Ashley Montagu concludes that women are, on the whole, more quick-witted than men, because they are born that way.¹⁹ Women realize it essential to pay attention to nuances in life, the different shades of meaning, in seeing and getting

18 Unfortunately, women's mysteries are insufficiently honoured in our Western and patriarchal religious and cultural traditions.

19 Cf. Ashley Montagu, 1999, 102.

to the point quickly. Woman's training in picking up such camouflaged signs is in part responsible for greater thoughtfulness, tact, and discretion. Unfortunately, women's sensitivity to life has been overlooked or taken for granted by society.

Bodily ability and Resistance

My recent survey among the women of Dindigul District, Tamilnadu brought to light that women are biologically strong to carry out any type of tasks. Most of the women demonstrated that they can work as hard as men at all occupations. They do a great deal better at some than men ever did, clerical work, for example, especially work demanding great precision and delicacy, as well as heavy labour. Furthermore, the female body also survives the rigors of life, whether normal or extreme. It endures all sorts of devitalising conditions better than men: starvation, beatings, exposure, fatigue, shock, illness and the like. A woman also serves as a recipient of her family's emotional responses to life's various situations. This unveils the fact that the female body is certainly not weak, fragile and emotional as society labels it to be. Rather, it is strong and sometimes even stronger than the male not only biologically but also emotionally.

Conclusion

Knowledge is power, and the power to possess knowledge is everyone's birthright. Effective conceptions of scientific objectivity and of a unified knowledge must be grounded in participatory values such as anti-racism, anti-casteism and anti-sexism. However, down the centuries, knowledge has been defined and explained primarily from the perspectives of the dominant groups. As postmodernism and feminist thinking has begun to seep through, it has made it inevitable to upset familiar assumptions about our ways of knowing. Consequently, it has brought to the open forum how male researchers, not only control the body of knowledge, but use this information to shape and control what count as knowledge while ignoring the very existence of the *Other* and their contribution. The influx of Philosophical, feminist and poststructuralist discussions around the

body²⁰ have gained significance not only for women in general but also for the female body. Today female body is identified as a powerful communicator of knowledge. Women bring to academia the knowledge derived from the 'lived experiences' of their body. The phenomenon of female body is a self-revealing work and it has many things to contribute to the academia. This defies the very standard of knowledge which assumes reason as the decisive factor for knowledge.

What has been explored here is only preliminary. The feminists need to bring to light more knowledge from the reservoir of female body which is still waiting to be explored.

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- 20 Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: An Introduction (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); "Body/Power" Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977. ed. Colin Gordon. (New York: Pantheon, 1980); Cf. Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Foucault, feminism and patriarchal power', in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby eds., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston, Mass: Northeastern University Press, 1988); "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" in Meyer, Diana Tiegens (ed.), *Feminist Social Thought*, (New York: Routledge, 1997): 93-111; Cf. Susan Bordo, 'Reading the Slender Body', in M. Jacobus, E. Fox Keller and S. Shuttleworth eds., *Women, Science and the Body Politic* (New York: Methuen, 1989); Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994).

Knowledge as Negotiation

A Critique of the Subaltern Studies Project

Patrick Gnanapragasam

The author is lecturer and Head-in-charge, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this essay he briefly traces the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Project in the South Asian and Latin American contexts as a case of rupture / break in the existing discursive formations of historical knowledge. Having appreciated its achievements, the essay critiques the project for treating subaltern knowledge in a binary mode and non-contextually, as something totally antagonistic to the post-Enlightenment colonial reason. It concludes that in the lives of the subalterns knowledge occurs as a matter of negotiation, and that the actual subalterns in the Indian context have appropriated and negotiated the post-Enlightenment colonial reason rather than isolating the latter.

I shall ever try to keep all untruths out from my thoughts,
knowing that thou art that truth which
has kindled the *light of reason* in my mind
(Gitanjali, IV)

1. The Rupture

Capturing the new mode of creating knowledge emergent at the contemporary (post-modern) era, Michel Foucault surmised that, "[B]eneath the great continuities of thought, beneath the solid, homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality, ... beneath the persistence of a particular genre, form, discipline, or theoretical activity, one is now trying to detect the incidence of interruptions."¹

1 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language*, GB: Tavistock Publications Ltd, 1972, p. 4.

Verily it is a rupture, because it is a moment of fragmenting the hitherto existing monolithic blocks of discursive formations of knowledge; it is a moment of experiencing the limit of the existing borders of knowledge, and entering into the threshold of new frontiers of knowledge. It is a rupture also in the power-knowledge nexus, which tends to form and get solidified over an era, effectively camouflaging alternate forms of knowledge and masking the subjugations of human groups. Rupturing, therefore, is an instance whereby subjugated 'knowledge' come to the fore, and assert themselves in a manner of empowering the hitherto subjugated peoples.

Thus we have seen the development of cultural studies which highlight the endogenous knowledge systems of indigenous people, feminist studies which highlight feminist standpoint epistemologies, ethnic studies which bring to light the aspect of agency inherent in ethnicities, and several other hitherto 'marginal' knowledge. "Such developments have served to extend histories from below as an alternative practice, frequently following oppositional orientations toward the institutional implications of knowledge and power."²

2. Subaltern Studies Project – a Case of Rupture

The Subaltern Studies Project, initiated by Ranajit Guha in 1982 in the South Asian context, is a significant case of rupture in the grand discursive formation of historical knowledge.³ According to the Project, the South Asian context, dominated over by Eurocentric colonial knowledge on the one hand, and, nationalist paradigms of thought on the other, was a fertile soil for the production and reproduction of "elitist" knowledge, especially in the field of history. Being an embodiment of the European Enlightenment rationality and other associated values of progress and development, the colonial

2 Saurabh Dube, *Stitches on Time – Colonial Textures and Postcolonial Tangles*, OUP, 2004, pp. 136-137.

3 This project has brought about 12 volumes so far. The initial volumes concentrated on cases of revolt, insurgency or rebellion of the native peasants against the colonial regime. The more recent ones have begun to treat the more structural realities, as caste, gender, etc.

knowledge presented a triumphalistic pretension, verging on hegemony; and the nationalist knowledge, even while positioning itself against the colonial power, however, has imbibed the colonial framework of knowledge, and created knowledge from the location of the nationalist bourgeoisie. During the post-independent era, the nationalist regime had taken over, without, however, losing the continuity with the colonial apparatuses like the modern state, bureaucracy, judiciary, etc. All these provided, according to the Subaltern Collective, the conditions of possibility for continued reproduction of nationalist and colonialist forms of knowledge in the South Asian context.

Against this context, the Subaltern Studies Project effected a break with the colonial and nationalist knowledge, severely indicting them for not 'representing' the voice and agency of the 'people' of the lower strata. The 'politics of the people', in the vision of Ranajit Guha, had an independent provenance, and embodied autonomous agency or subjecthood of the people, being controlled neither by the colonial dispensation nor by the nationalist classes. In the words of Guha, "...parallel to the domain of elite politics, there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. This was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither organised from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter."⁴ Knowledge issuing forth from the site of politics of the people came to be named as the subaltern knowledge.

Guha understood subaltern knowledge as a specific code that operated at the core of the consciousness of the people from whom such acts of resistance as insurgency, revolts, rebellion, etc issued forth by way of subverting the yoke of domination imposed upon

4 Ranajit Guha, "Subaltern Studies: Projects for Our Time and Their Convergence," Ileana Rodriguez (ed), *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Project*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 42.

them by the dominant elite. By the dominant elite, he meant the dominating foreign elite (the colonizers), as well as the dominant local elites (the feudal magnates, etc). He positioned the 'subaltern' or the 'people' as categories diametrically opposed to these elites. He identified them as "the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper-middle peasants..."⁵ The subaltern knowledge – which was perceived to be constituted by such elements as traditions, practices, and techniques which had the ability to resist or subvert – was understood by Guha essentially in its direct opposition to the dominant knowledge as found in colonial, (European Marxist), and national bourgeois historiographies.

Thus, the Subaltern Studies Project undertook those instances of subaltern consciousness. As pointed out by Saurabh Dube, and shared by several commentators, these "exercises within subaltern studies reconstructed the varied trajectories and modes of consciousness of the movements of subordinate groups in India in order to emphasize the autonomy and agency of these communities."⁶

This endeavour bore the features of a rupture that Foucault spoke of. It was a threshold moment for the emergence of a new kind / method of knowledge, even as it represented a break or a discontinuity in the existing historical narrative of South Asia. Veena Das commented on the initiative as a "magma of significations", by which "thought in objectified forms is ... ripped open", "order interrogated", and "the representational order (is) in conflict with the emergence of a new order."⁷ With such features, the movement of subaltern knowledge emerged and developed itself in and through the explorations of a number of scholars known as the Subaltern Collective.

5 Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of the Colonial India," in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies I – Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi: OUP, 1982, p. 8.

6 Saurabh Dube, *Stitches on Time...*, p. 130.

7 Veena Das, "Subaltern as Perspective," Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies VI*. OUP, 1989, pp. 312-313.

3. Widening of the Rupture

It is the force or the strength of the subjugated knowledge that they kept widening their breath in the discursive field of knowledge. An international movement of subaltern knowledge-making arose in due time. In the year 1992 we witnessed the emergence of a Latin American Subaltern Studies group. Inspired by the South Asian Subaltern Collective, a group of Latin American scholars, working in the American Academia, came together to initiate this Latin American Subaltern Studies Project.⁸ "Writing history from the underside, from the perspective of the poor" was, like that of the Indian project, the vision of the Latin American project too. Ileana Rodriguez, editor of *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, states that, "like the South Asian Collective, we were also dissatisfied with the realization that the poor had not been recorded in a history of their own, but rather had been subsumed in a narrative which was not exactly their own."⁹ Like the South Asian Collective, they too, treating Latin America as one of the continents that suffered colonialism, attempted to dismantle the 'colonial reason' (Enlightenment reason) by way of freeing the subaltern from its colonial imprisonment. It took the subaltern as a pre-western native subject, anti-dating the colonial construction of the subjecthood.

The Latin American Subaltern Studies group considered its work as the "strategy for our times" (as in the words of Gayatri Spivak) and worked within the broad theme of post-colonialism that had emerged in the American Academia by the time. As put forth by Rodriguez, "Latin American subaltern studies aims to be a radical critique of elite cultures, of liberal, bourgeois, and modern

8 Originally it was a group of five, having John Beverley, Robert Carr, Jose Rabasa, Javier Sanjines, and Ileana Rodriguez as members. The group emerged out of earlier study groups like the Marxist Literary Group organised by Frederic Jameson. Later the group got extended.

9 Ileana Rodriguez, "Reading Subalterns Across Texts, Disciplines, and Theories: From Representation to Recognition," in Ileana Rodriguez (ed), *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001, p. 3.

epistemologies and projects, and of their different propositions regarding representation of the subaltern.”¹⁰ With its broader concerns of cultural studies, the Latin American Initiative was involved also in deconstruction of literary texts as part of its subaltern critique.

The postmodern moment became the common ground, the common hermeneutical key so to say, for the Asian as well as the Latin American Subaltern Studies Collectives to undertake a dismantling of the homogeneous colonial subject and substituting it with heterogeneous subaltern subjects. Guha spoke of this common ground as follows: “I am therefore happy to have postmodernism be the ground of our convergence. On that ground we – that is, projects called Subaltern Studies and others with different names but similar orientations – come together with concerns specific to our time.”¹¹

4. Achilles’ Heel

As a case of rupture or discontinuity in the vast canvas of historical knowledge, and as a case of bringing to birth alternate knowledge from the perspective of the subjugated peoples, the Subaltern Studies Project, along with its variants of post-colonial studies, offered great promise to the human endeavour of generating emancipatory knowledge. It promised to rip open the rocky formations of hegemonic knowledges that had got structured through its operation in nexus with the dominating powers. It promised to give history to the subaltern subjects, whose creative agency suffered non-recognition under the domination of oppressive powers. It promised a new dynamic historiography which would bring fresh air into the veins of the body of knowledge, and infuse strength for emancipatory ideals.

However, the promise remains by and large unfulfilled, and the project looks wearied today after twenty-five years of existence. It has not enlivened the practice of historiography, with its alternate vision. The project has been critiqued by several scholars – even those that formed part of the project during the initial years. Sumit Sarkar, for example, critiqued the manner in which the very category

10 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

11 Ranajit Guha, “Subaltern Studies: Projects for our Times ...” p. 41.

of subaltern has disappeared from the subaltern project; Spivak has raised a serious question on the very possibility of the subaltern to speak for him/herself, given the context wherein the subaltern voice remains the documents manufactured by the dominant others; etc. Finding the subaltern category not a very concrete and effective one, others have made it into a perspective,¹² or a metaphor,¹³ and so on. The concept has taken on varied meanings, losing its effectiveness as a new paradigm of knowledge.

The Achilles' heel of the project crippled the project at least in two ways. One is treating the subaltern as a fixed and stable category, in a scheme of binary division, as *against* the elitist (foreign, native, etc); second is, not situating the subaltern contextually and treating it as a kind of romantic subject of a revolutionary past, and leaving the everyday history for future writing. Say, the kind of everyday struggle the actual subalterns undergo in a caste-based Indian society is not seriously considered in the subaltern writings! It would do well to elaborate on these two ways:

4.1. Fixed Binary – A Paralysis

The Subaltern Studies Project, as a child of its own time, embodies traces both of post-structuralism as well as structuralism. Even while drawing upon post-modern resources of critique of a universal subject, Ranajit Guha invested the understanding of subaltern with a structuralist binary of subaltern Vs elites. This binary was given as a mould within which the subaltern consciousness was to be understood. Guha positioned the subaltern consciousness as *totally antagonistic* to and as *completely untouched* by the colonial knowledge, especially by its Enlightenment rationality.

He took the entire colonial dispensation, i.e. its state, judiciary, bureaucracy, its educational systems and policies, etc as

12 Cf. Veena Das, "Subaltern as Perspective..."

13 Cf. Henry Swarz, "Subaltern Studies: Radical History in the Metaphoric Mode," in David Ludden (ed), *Reading Subaltern Studies – Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.

manifestations of the Enlightenment reason, which, in his estimate, was a failure and anti-subaltern. In his own words:

The colonial state in South Asia, ... stood thus for a historic failure of reason. There was nothing in its record to justify the latter's promise of a steady progress toward happiness of all humankind. Neither capitalism nor liberalism, the twin engines of reason, proved powerful enough to overcome local resistance in the subcontinent's indigenous economy and culture. Colonialism in South Asia therefore gives the lie to the universalist pretensions of reason. This, I believe, is the essence of the postcolonial critique as it developed in our work.¹⁴

The colonial critique developed by the Subaltern Project thus automatically became a critique of the colonial knowledge, and of the Enlightenment reason. Guha chastised the colonial knowledge for its dubious function of erecting the Asian past on the dichotomy of the superiority of the colonizer and the perennial inferiority of the colonized.¹⁵

He was insistent on critiquing colonialism on three grounds: "first, that the phenomenon of post-Enlightenment colonialism is constitutive of and presupposed in modernity even if it is not always explicitly acknowledged to be so; second, that postmodernism as a critique can never be adequate to itself unless it takes colonialism into account as a historic barrier that reason can never cross; and third, that the colonial experience has outlived decolonization and continues to be related significantly to the concerns of our own time."¹⁶ Thus critique of colonialism and its associated Enlightenment reason, remained to be a central project of subaltern knowledge.

Others of the Collective too came in aid to support the virulent attack of Guha raised against the modern Enlightenment rationality.

14 Ranajit Guha, "Subaltern Studies: Projects for our Times..." p. 43.

15 Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography," in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies VI*, OUP 1989, pp. 211-212.

16 Ranajit Guha, "Subaltern Studies: Projects for our Times..." pp. 41-42.

Veena Das commented approvingly of the features of subaltern studies which critiqued the 'structures of modernity' like the Western law, medicine, bureaucracy, police, and so on.¹⁷ Partha Chatterjee reflected about how the subject-centred rationality implied arrogance and violence against the native others. We will do well to listen to him:

By now knowledgeable people all over the world have become familiar with the charges levelled against the subject-centred rationality characteristic of post-Enlightenment modernity. This subject-centred reason, we have been told, claims for itself a singular universality by asserting its epistemic privilege over all other local, plural, and often incommensurable knowledges; it proclaims its own unity and homogeneity by declaring all other subjectivities as inadequate, fragmentary, and subordinate; it declares for the rational subject an epistemic as well as moral sovereignty that is meant to be self-determined, unconditioned, and self-transparent. Against this arrogant, intolerant, self-aggrandizing rational subject of modernity, critics in recent years have been trying to resurrect the virtues of the fragmentary, the local, and the subjugated in order to unmask the will to power that lies at the very heart of modern rationality and to decentre its epistemological and moral subject."¹⁸

This manner of implicating the colonial state and its associated knowledge system looks to me a case overstated. Guha's writings suffer from an exaggerated focussing upon the binary of colonial dominance vs non-colonial or native subjecthood. It appears as if this binary exists in a stable manner, as a wall between two segments of people, not in any way, becoming porous or relenting to negotiations by either party. This amounts to certain reification of the binary of subaltern vs elite. Again, while Guha is so critical of the kind of inner

17 Cf. Veena Das, "Subaltern as Perspective...", p. 313.

18 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments – Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, OUP, 1986, p. xiii.

contradiction the colonial liberalism suffered – that it emphasised freedom of the individual at home, but subjected the colonised people without any freedom, - he seems to suffer from a lack of vision of not seeing how the colonial knowledge, especially its modernity, mediated by the mass educational systems introduced by the westerners, etc was not per se a dominating force, but that it served as a liberating force too, for the subaltern people.

Guha, by projecting a binary opposition between colonial and local knowledge, is contradicting himself on yet another serious ground. His project of subaltern studies is anchored on the point that the subalterns are not passive people, resigned to their victimhood, but people, who create history by their own acts of rebellion, revolt, etc. This basic premise stands for the fact that the subalterns do have their agency, creative potentiality which exercises their subjecthood. If that is the case, why does he fail to see that the subaltern people need not be gullible victims of the colonial post-Enlightenment reason? His efforts to show those acts of rebellion of the subaltern as something manifesting their agency, can also be diverted to find the innumerable ways in which the subaltern negotiate their lives with resources available in a given context of life.

4.2. Failure to Treat the Subaltern Contextually

In his identification of the subaltern people, Guha has mentioned the names of such categories of people as rural gentry, impoverished landlords, and so on. It is symptomatic of the case that this list does not consciously include those categories of people as Dalits or outcastes who suffer from the millennia-old caste system of the land. Any serious observer of Indian society would be easily struck with the fact that here not merely the public sphere, but also the private sphere is seriously dominated over by the element of caste and its religious-cultural supports. Guha wrote about 'negations' as the characteristic of the subaltern, meaning by it, the act of negating the negation imposed on the subordinate people by the elites – the colonial and the native bourgeois subjects. However, he failed so obviously to acknowledge the fact that the actual and contextual negation suffered by the subaltern people is the caste negation of subjecthood.

Dilip Menon's incisive words are worth taking note of at this juncture: "Caste is the central faultline of modern India. Yet Indian social science has a tendency to study it as a displacement of what are seen as more fundamental identities such as class or ethnicity, despite the fact that the public spaces of modern India are inflected by violence against dalits and subordinated castes and its domestic spaces structured by strict prohibitions against caste miscegenation".¹⁹ The Subaltern Studies Project has, to a very large extent, failed in theorising on the question of caste and has culpably neglected understanding of its role in the operation of power or in the construction of subjecthood for the people of the lower strata.

5. Rupturing the Rupture

The moderate achievements of the South Asian as well as transnational post-colonial studies have been muffled by the failures this movement of thought is confronting in the contemporary context. Perhaps, what one looks for is yet another rupture to locate the subaltern knowledge contextually within the life-worlds of the actual subalterns. This would be another rupture, because, unlike the rupture made by the already known Subaltern Collective, this one would make a discontinuity in knowledge from the vantage point of the actual subaltern people in India like the Dalits, the Tribals, the women, the minorities, and so on. Looking at reality from their angle would lead not to fixed binary divisions, but perhaps to an understanding of knowledge as 'negotiation' undertaken from emancipatory concerns or locations.

5.1. Subaltern Knowledge as Emancipatory Negotiation

As pointed out earlier, Guha treated the subaltern knowledge as a code, a linguistic code, which propelled insurgency or revolt against the colonial regime and its apparatuses. The protagonists of this code were the peasants, impoverished landlords, rural gentry and so on. They manifested their autonomous subaltern agency, according to Guha, in acts of rebellion, and these moments of rebellion must become the subject of history.

19 Dilip M. Menon, *The Blindness of Insight – Essays on Caste in Modern India*, Pondicherry, India: Navayana, 2006, p. 1.

Away from such acts of rebellion, we see the vast majority of the people in this country negotiating their lives through hostile conditions of oppression and exploitation. It has been the case during the colonial era, and it is the case even during the post-colonial era. Their lives have become instances of continuous negotiation against dominance, oppression, and exploitation. Caste, patriarchy, majoritarianism, are some of the forms of dominance that these people have to wade through in their everyday life situations.

Looking at reality from their angle, knowledge does not become a project of neat binary divisions. It is one of on-going negotiation. In this negotiation, neither colonial modernity, nor native modernity remains untouchable. In fact, the colonial modernity and its associated Enlightenment rationality had become an ally during the colonial era in their emancipatory projects. Enabled by the modern education of the colonial era, the subaltern people constructed a dignified self and respectable identity for themselves, more often than not, through religious idioms. They constructed emancipatory utopias, with the help of modernising teleological thought. Construction of such utopias meant fashioning of a past, and a present around a teleological future which embodied their emancipated future. In such endeavours, they drew upon from the egalitarian discourse mediated through educational and other political instruments imbued with the Enlightenment values of reason, equality, progress, and the like.

Peter Robb, a professor of History of India in the University of London, makes a strong case in his recent book, *Empire, Modernity, and the Nation*, that in the unfolding of Indian subjecthood, the role of modern rationality, mediated through the colonial dispensation, can never be ignored. The subaltern people have been always struggling against oppression in all phases of history; but, says Robb, after the colonial period, their struggle obtained new methods and strategies only the colonial modernity could supply them with. In his own words:

What was new in the colonial period? When they began to dispute their oppression again, it was with new vocabularies and methods. They favoured education; they protested over

social and economic rights; they sought political representation; they founded newspapers and societies... They would have been different, with different indigenous histories and contexts. But they also would not have been the same without – a fairly random list – Christian missionary activities, ideas of equality before law, and the availability of print. It is here that one can begin to examine the effect of colonialism.²⁰

Moreover, modernity is not something fixed and non-negotiable for all ages and countries. People, through their contextual negotiation, fashioned their own modernity in India. It is, as Peter van der Veer argues elaborately in his book, *Imperial Encounters – Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*: “Origins of modernity cannot be neatly located in Western civilization; they must be sought in the mess of encounters in which Indian begums, Hindu converts, and later Theosophical Universalists are all present.”²¹

Modernity, thus, is a process whose effect emerges in multiple encounters of people, histories, cultures, and so on. The subaltern people have been intently involved in the process of encountering modernity as mediated by the colonial dispensation, and have thereby, negotiated their conditions of life towards better degrees of self-dignity and freedom.

Conclusion

What Guha and others started in 1982 has, after twenty five years, looks weakened. It started off with a strong opposition to the colonial knowledge or historiography, that represented us in the way in which it did. It dwelt upon such forms of resistance as the insurrection of the peasants to show the active agency of the subaltern people of this South Asian region. Perhaps, its more or less single-focussed

20 Peter Robb, *Liberalism, Modernity, and the Nation*, OUP, 2006, p. 8.

21 Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters – Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*, Permanent Black, 2001, p. 160.

colonial opposition has disabled them to take note of the way, the subalterns of the subalterns – the Dalits, the women, the tribals, etc – charted a different path of their history, not so much in opposition to colonial knowledge as in negotiation with the latter. In the course of history, these subaltern people have also shown to the world that *Knowledge is Negotiation*.

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Indigenous Knowledge for Survival

A Descriptive Enquiry

Pushpa Joseph

The author is lecturer in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. In this article she argues that indigenous knowledge is survival oriented and contributes to sustainable living. With a focus on local knowledge, relying on tribal forms, it articulates the holistic foundations of indigenous knowledge, which is based on a worldview of interconnectedness thus creating open systems. It stipulates the personal and practical characteristics of indigenous agricultural knowledge vis-à-vis scientific dominant knowledge systems and highlights how such open systems contribute to sustainable living and development.

“Indigenous knowledge is the social capital of the poor, their main asset to invest in the struggle for survival to produce food, to provide for shelter or to achieve control of their own lives.”¹

Indigenous knowledge is the local knowledge that is unique to a given culture or society. It is the basis for agriculture, health care, food preparation, education, environmental conservation, and a host of other activities. Indigenous knowledge is also known as local knowledge, folk knowledge, people's knowledge, traditional wisdom or traditional science. This knowledge is passed from generation to generation, usually by word of mouth and cultural rituals, and has been foundational for the wide range of activities that sustain a society and its environment in many parts of the world for many centuries.

1 World Bank Website <http://www.worldbank.org/afr/ik/basichtm>

Knowledge about the environment had been central to human survival throughout history. Survival was virtually impossible in hunting and gathering societies without a good knowledge about forest and wildlife - plant and animal species, their growth environments and habitats, growth cycles, behaviour of animals in relation to their environment, specific characteristics of plant and animal species and their uses. In the same way, farming societies depended upon a keen understanding of the local natural environment and ecological processes leading to the regeneration of environmental resources, e.g. soil fertility and water. By interacting with their immediate environment over centuries, local people have gained an enormous volume of knowledge about their environment. Their knowledge involves not only environmental resources available within the locality but also how to manage these resources in a sustainable manner.²

The main argument of this paper is that indigenous knowledge is survival based. Indigenous people have a wide knowledge of the ecosystems in which they live and of ways of using natural resources sustainably³. It can also help people learn how to live in harmony with nature and the environment in a sustainable fashion. However, colonial education systems replaced the practical everyday life aspects of indigenous knowledge and ways of learning with Western and modern notions of abstract knowledge and academic ways of learning.

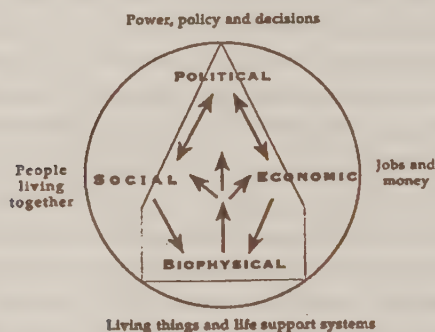
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- 2 See the essays in Roy Ellen. *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and its Transformations: Critical Anthropological Perspectives* (Studies in environmental anthropology). (Amsterdam: OPA, 2000). The contributors focus on a series of interrelated issues in their interrogation of indigenous knowledge and its specific applications within the localised contexts of particular Asian societies and regional cultures. Also see the essays in Balasinorwala, T., A. Kothari, and M. Goyal, (compilers). *Participatory Conservation: Paradigm Shifts in International Policy*. (Pune: IUCN/TILCEPA/Kalpavriksh, 2004)
 - 3 For an excellent exposition from the Indonesian context see, Tania Murray Lee, "Locating Indigenous Environmental Knowledge in Indonesia," in Roy Ellen et.al. (eds.) *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and its Transformations: Critical Anthropological Perspectives* (Studies in environmental anthropology). (Amsterdam: OPA, 2000) 121-150.

Today, there is a grave risk that much indigenous knowledge is being lost and, along with it, valuable knowledge about ways of living sustainably both ecologically and socially.⁴

The Holistic Foundations of Indigenous Knowledge

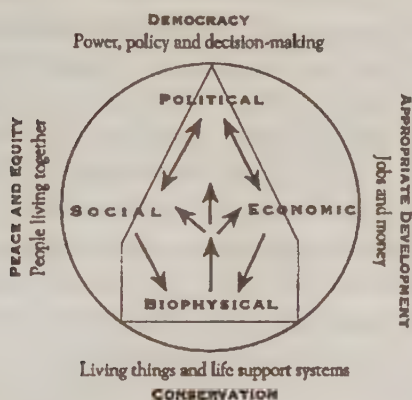
All indigenous knowledge related to life is based on the four fold understanding of the environment as seen in the figure given below. The interrelated ethos embedded in their world view is well illustrated in the following diagrams.⁵

The Four Systems of the Environment⁶



- 4 See the study of Nandini Sundar, "The Construction and Deconstruction of 'Indigenous Knowledge' in India's Joint Forest Management Programme," in Roy Ellen et.al. (eds.) *Indigenous Environmental Knowledge and its Transformations: Critical Anthropological Perspectives (Studies in environmental anthropology)*. (Amsterdam: OPA, 2000) 79- 100.
- 5 For such an illustration see, Berkes F. *Sacred Ecology: Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Resource Management*. (London: Taylor & Francis, 1998) The book explores a diversity of relationships that different groups have developed with their environment, using extensive case studies from research conducted with the Cree Indians of James Bay in the eastern subarctic of North America. The book deals with concepts, practice and issues related to sacred ecology. It discusses the emergence of the traditional ecological and management systems; how it actually works and the potential of traditional ecological knowledge.
- 6 Source: R. O'Donogue, Natal Parks Board, South Africa.

The Values Underlying a Sustainable Environment⁷



The Value Based and Open Knowledge Systems

The tribals in general and of India in particular have great regard for the forest. This is manifested in their perceptions of their forest environment, especially their prevailing concept of natural resource conservation which gives them a sense of caring and stewardship over their forest resources. This involves responsible and moderate use of forests, so that they will continue to be sustaining for future generations. Greed has no place among the rural folk which in practice means that when they harvest crops, they use only the mature stems, and leave the young shoots for harvesting in a few years' time⁸.

They also greatly respect and protect the trees, which produce the seeds that the wild animals eat. They do not pollute the rivers because they also know that wild animals eat the plants that grow by

7 Source: R. O'Donogue, Natal Parks Board, South Africa.

8 See Sushil Saigal. *Does Community Based Conservation Make Economic Sense? Lessons from India*. (Pune: Kalpavriksh, 2000) This book assesses the economic (material, financial) and other benefits that communities and society in general receive from community based management of natural resources. Examples from various parts of India illustrate the point that conservation does not have to be inimical to people's livelihoods and economic development but in fact can greatly complement human welfare and economic well-being.

the river banks. They also let the animals get their share of the trees and protect those trees that the animals love. They have a great fear of tree-fellers who cut the trees indiscriminately in their jungle because they are afraid that the disturbance will decrease their food supply⁹. The forest seems to be everything to them. They feel an affinity with it and are thankful for its supply of staple foods, building materials, medicines and raw materials for their handicraft. The forest is their world and they live in harmony with it and so guard it jealously.¹⁰

Through their day-to-day activities of agriculture and hunting, they utilize and extract forest resources to produce food and manufacture materials for their consumption and tools for their survival activities, respectively. They have been practising this way of life through many generations, using a complex and highly adaptive system, such as cultivation of hill and swamp rice. To cultivate their staple food, rice, they used different agricultural techniques, both shifting and permanent, depending on the different types of paddy.

In short, it has been their harmonizing and systematic methodologies of using their environments (particularly land and forests) that have enabled them to practice similar economic activities through many generations to produce food and manufacture materials,

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- 9 See for instance, Rajasekaran, B. and M. B. Whiteford. "Rice-Crab Production in South India: The Role of Indigenous Knowledge in Designing Food Security Policies." *Food Policy* 18 (3), 1992: 237-247.
 - 10 Neema Pathak and Vivek Gour Broome. *Tribal Self Rule and Natural Resource Management: Community Based Conservation at Mendha Lekha, Maharastra, India*. (Pune: Kalpavriksh, 2001) The story of Mendha Lekha village in Gadchiroli district of Maharastra State in one of struggle and transformation of a once-suppressed Gond tribal community into a well-informed and empowered one. This book describes the process of attaining self-rule and taking control of the surrounding forests, which has resulted in an enhancement of social and ecological security. It explores the reasons for the success of this community initiative, constraints it faces, future directions to take and major lessons that it holds for a decentralised conservation system in the country.

not only for themselves but also to sell the surplus to non-agricultural people in the country¹¹.

Indigenous Knowledge Related to Agriculture

The agricultural knowledge of the tribals is practical, factual, detailed and personal. In a biodiversity hotspot like Chattisgarh for example, the knowledge of the tribals, both men and women, include a detailed distinction between many varieties of the main crops or sub crops, be it wheat, rice or millet. They distinguish on the basis of smell and taste, as well as adaptability to specific terrain, even specific fields.

In the in-fields, mixed cultivation of several crops is guided by a detailed view on what crops should go together and which definitely not. Rotation in the out-fields follows a distinct pattern (beans, millet, tubers). The start of the cycle, the end of the fallow period, is indicated by specific grasses appearing on the fields. The end of the cycle is shown by the emergence of specific weeds between the millet and tubers. The start of the cultivation season is known by both counting moons, watching the exact spot of the sunset and waiting for the migration of specific birds. During the cultivation season, the farmers are guided by a detailed knowledge of manure, both for the millet fields as well as for the tubers.

This knowledge is practical. As subsistence farmers they are survival oriented, aiming at an optimization of the chances for survival,

11 See for similar arguments from other perspectives, Agarwal, A. *Dying Wisdom: State of India's Environment: A Citizen's Report*. (Pune: CSE, 1997) A comprehensive book on the traditional water harvesting systems of India. It explores the rise, fall and potential of this system in the different ecological zones of the country spanning from the Trans-Himalayan Region to the Islands. It documents water harvesting systems from prehistoric times, through evidences from archaeological excavations and references in ancient texts. It studies how the village-based water management systems of the historical times were manipulated for state supremacy during the Raj. In conclusion it highlights the present day water crises and the efforts by several NGOs to revive the water harvesting systems of the past.

not at a maximization of the harvest. They do so by spreading risks; sowing several vegetable varieties, millet and other tubers, with their main crop of rice they are sure that though certainly some crops will not yield a harvest, some will. For the millet and other tubers, which is best adapted to dry conditions, they choose several varieties with differing drought resistance; some will yield. Agriculture is to do with survival, not profit, a tendency which does not make them rich, but has the great advantage of keeping them alive, as it has done throughout the past centuries.

Knowledge is factual and detailed

Most tribal agricultural communities have a crystallized view of the general characteristics and exigencies of each of their crops: what amount of rain is needed, the dangers they run from crop diseases and parasites, the amount of manure needed, the way in which one crop combines with others, etc. In even more detail, the farmers know from the look of each field what has been grown on it, what the yield was, what manure serves best and how much weeding is needed. They know what plants should appear before starting cultivation in general, and where to expect those grasses on that particular field. They know the slight depressions in the dunes where they can bury a pot to catch some rain for drinking when out in the fields for days. When tending their vegetable gardens, they know at what stage of growth what type of manure is to be used (some groups distinguish between at least eight different types of fertilizer), and they know when the tubers and other vegetables are mature by judging the state of the flowers.

Knowledge is personal

A farmer has this knowledge about his own fields, the fields he uses. When the fields change hands, the former user is expected to indicate the best use of the field to its new 'owner'. As the fields fall into well-definable categories, this personal knowledge consists of some details per field, on top of the general knowledge pertaining to that particular terrain.

The above mentioned qualities make for a very open system of local knowledge and differ in many ways from the dominant views of knowledge.

Aboriginal Knowledge vis-à-vis dominant knowledge of Nature

Aboriginal knowledge about the natural world contrasts with Western scientific knowledge in a number of ways. Aboriginal and scientific knowledge differ in their social goals: survival of a people versus the luxury of gaining knowledge for the sake of knowledge and for power over nature and other people. They differ in intellectual goals: to co-exist with mystery in nature by celebrating mystery versus eradicating mystery by explaining it away.¹² They differ in their association with human action: intimately and subjectively interrelated versus formally and objectively decontextualized. They differ in other ways as well: holistic Aboriginal perspectives with their gentle, accommodating, intuitive, and spiritual wisdom, as opposed to reductionist Western science with its aggressive, manipulative, mechanistic, and analytical explanations. They even differ in their basic concepts of time: circular for Aboriginals, rectilinear for scientists.

On the one hand, the culture of science is guided by the fact that the physical universe is knowable through rational empirical means, albeit Western rationality and culture-laden observations; while on the other hand, Aboriginal knowledge of nature celebrates the fact that the physical universe is mysterious but can be survived if one uses rational empirical means, albeit Aboriginal rationality and culture-laden observations. Aboriginal knowledge is not static, but evolves dynamically with new observations, new insights, and new spiritual messages.

The norms, values, beliefs, expectations, and conventional actions of Aboriginal peoples contrast dramatically with the subculture of science. Aboriginal knowledge of nature tends to be thematic, survival-oriented, holistic, empirical, rational, contextualized, specific, communal, ideological, spiritual, non-elitist, cooperative, coexistent,

12 Mauro, Francesco and Hardison, P. D. "Traditional Knowledge of Indigenous and Local Communities: International Debate and Policy Initiatives." *Ecological Applications*. Vol. 10, No. 5. (October 2000). 1263-1269.

and peaceful. Endemic to Aboriginal culture is environmental responsibility, a quality that leads to sustainable science in terms of Aboriginal cultures.

Using Traditional Knowledge to Live Sustainably¹³

Relationship to the Land

For indigenous people, the land is the source of life a gift from the Creator that nourishes, supports and teaches. Although indigenous peoples vary widely in their customs, culture, and impact on the land, all consider the Earth like a parent and revere it accordingly. "Mother Earth" is the centre of the universe, the core of their culture, the origin of their identity as a people. She connects them with their past (as the home of the ancestors), with the present (as provider of their material needs), and with the future (as the legacy they hold in trust for their children and grandchildren). In this way, indigenousness carries with it a sense of belonging to a place.

At the heart of this deep bond is a perception, an awareness, an innate wisdom that all of life's mountains, rivers, skies, animals, plants, insects, rocks, people are inseparably interconnected. Material and spiritual worlds are woven together in one complex web, all living things imbued with a sacred meaning. This living sense of connectedness that grounds indigenous peoples in the soil has all but disappeared among city dwellers, the cause of much modern alienation and despair.

The idea that the land can be owned, that it can belong to someone even when left unused, uncared for, or uninhabited is foreign to indigenous peoples. In the so-called developed world, land is in the hands of private individuals, corporate investors, or the state and can be sold at the will of the owner. For indigenous peoples land is held collectively for the community (though competition between communities, and with outsiders, for rights of use, has sometimes led to conflict). According to indigenous law, humankind can never be

13 Burger, J. *The Gaia Atlas of First Peoples: A Future for the Indigenous World*. (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 20-62.

more than a trustee of the land, with a collective responsibility to preserve it.

The predominant rational world view is that nature must be studied, dissected, and mastered and progress measured by the ability to extract secrets and wealth from the Earth. Indigenous people do not consider the land as merely an economic resource. Their ancestral lands are literally the source of life, and their distinct ways of life are developed and defined in relationship to the environment around them. Indigenous people are people of the land. This difference has often led to misunderstandings. Many have assumed that indigenous people have no sense of territory because they do not necessarily physically demarcate their lands. However, indigenous people know the extent of their lands, and they know how the land, water, and other resources need to be shared. They understand only too well that to harm the land is to destroy ourselves, since we are part of the same organism.

Nature's Pharmacy

In many parts of the world, indigenous societies classify soils, climate, plant and animal species and recognize their special characteristics. Indigenous people have words for plants and insects that have not yet been identified by the world's botanists and entomologist. The Hanunoo people of the Philippines, for example, distinguish 1600 plant species in their forest, 400 more than scientists working in the same area. Of the estimated 250,000 to 500,000 plant species in the world, more than 85 percent are in environments that are the traditional homes of indigenous people. Nearly 75 percent of 121 plant-derived prescription drugs used worldwide were discovered following leads from indigenous medicine. Globally, indigenous peoples use 3,000 different species of plant to control fertility alone. The Kallaywayas, wandering healers of Bolivia, make use of 600 medicinal herbs; traditional healers in Southeast Asia may employ as many as 6,500 plants for drugs. Almost all trees and many plants have a place in medicinal lore.

Some scientists now believe that indigenous knowledge may help them to discover important new cures for diseases such as AIDS and cancer. Many developed countries realize the potential for

indigenous medicine. It is locally available, culturally acceptable, and cheaper than imported drugs.

Knowledge of Nature Medicinal Plants in India

Indigenous people work on body and mind together to help cure illness. Medicinal plants are used to treat the spiritual origins of disease as well as the physical symptoms. The vast knowledge of such plants is now beginning to be acknowledged by the rest of the world. So is the role played by indigenous people as custodians of the world's genetic heritage. A botanical survey of India reveals that tribal peoples of the northeast use plant drugs to cure fevers, bronchitis, blood and skin diseases, eye infections, spleen ulcers, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Knowledge of their use is passed on by the "vaiyas", who are Indian herbal medicine doctors. In a single area of 277 sq km (107 sq miles) 210 types of medicinal plants have been found. The Kameng and Lohit peoples in Arunachal Pradesh, crush a bulb of *Fritillaria cirrhosa* to a paste to relieve muscle pains. Society research has now confirmed the presence of a chemical similar to cocaine in a related *Fritillaria* plant that brings relief to muscular pain. Growing evidence of plant-based contraception is available among many tribal peoples. Worldwide, over 3000 plants are employed for contraceptive use. In the Karjat tribal area of Maharashtra, near the west coast of India, a native herb taken twice a year is said to be effective. The Karjat study concludes that traditional health practices can provide up to half the local primary health needs. Enlightened health-care workers are beginning to reintroduce traditional plant remedies where allopathic drugs have become commonplace. Properly studied and recorded, this traditional knowledge could revolutionize the world of medicine.¹⁴

Traditional knowledge and Resource Management

The industrial world is facing an ecological crisis. Yet few industrial economists would admit they could learn from indigenous people.

14 S.N. Chaudhary and R.P. Singh. *Tribes of Pachmarhi Biosphere Reserve and Their Indigenous Knowledge*. (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 2006) 5-10.

Their economies are often called 'primitive', their technology dismissed as 'Stone Age', and most governments assume they can benefit only from salaried employment. Yet these traditional ways of life have proved highly durable. Hunting and fishing have allowed the Inuit to survive in the Arctic; nomadic pastoralism provides a livelihood for people in the arid Sahelian region of Africa; shifting cultivation has sustained hundreds of distinct cultures in the fragile ecosystem in the Amazon and the forests of Southeast Asia. Non-indigenous people have not been able to survive in these extreme conditions without destroying the balance of the ecosystem.¹⁵

The key to this success is sustainability. Indigenous people today use the resources available without depleting them. They use their intimate knowledge of plants, soils, animals, climate, and seasons, not to exploit nature but to co-exist alongside it. This involves careful management, control of population, the use of small quantities but a wide diversity of plants and animals, small surpluses, and minimum wastage. Plants provide food, medicines, pesticides, poisons, building materials; animals provide meat, clothes, string, implements, oil.

Indigenous knowledge of nature has ensured the survival of many people in fragile habitats. But it is a knowledge centered not on exploitation but on the harmony of the natural world. All flora and fauna have a place in an ordered universe made up of humankind, nature, and spirits. And indigenous cultures help to protect the natural world from destruction through religion and rituals. Animals are commonly held in respect and their numbers maintained, often through careful management. Those following the Bishnoi religion in India, for example, have survived many droughts because they will not kill any animal or a tree. They breed cattle selectively, monitor the feeding of their camels, and live on milk, yogurt, and a few cultivated crops. Many people have developed a detailed understanding of animal behaviour. Those living in tropical forests, for example, recognize

15 Paul Chandler, *The Indigenous Knowledge of Ecological Processes among Peasants in Fujian, China. Agriculture and Human Values* 8 (1/2), 1991 : 59-66.

that where two different ecological zones meet, the hunting is more productive. Many even grow crops or trees to attract certain animals and increase their numbers.

Knowledge and Sustainable Cultivation

Shifting cultivation, (sometimes called "slash and burn"), is a sustainable economic system that will not harm the environment. It is the most commonly practised system among indigenous people of Asia and lowland Latin America, and provides them with a high degree of economic independence and cultural integrity. Given sufficient land and low population density, it is a highly successful way of using the forest. The Karen of Thailand practise this system. The economy of the Karen people is based almost exclusively on subsistence dry rice production. An area is cleared of trees, undergrowth is burned, rice planted and later harvested. Each year a new site is chosen and the cycle takes seven years to return to the site first cleared. The system permits regeneration of the forest and thin tropical soils, and does not expose the steep slopes to heavy rains, which would eventually wash away the soil in a fixed-field system. Money has virtually no place in a Karen community. If a village has enough food it is prosperous. When villagers say "we have enough rice", it means not simply that they will survive, but that they have everything they need. If, however, shifting cultivation is unable to provide for the entire needs of a village, the people grow chilli or bamboo shoots, or they may collect and sell honey or other forest produce. Nearly all the income raised is used to buy rice.¹⁶

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- 16 Maryam Niamir, "Indigenous Systems of Natural Resource Management among Pastoralists of Arid and Semi-Arid Africa", in D.M. Warren, David Brokensha, and L. Jan Slikkerveer (eds.). *Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The Cultural Dimension of Development*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992) 28-45. Also see Radcliffe, Edward B. Gregoire Ouedraogo, Sonia E. Patten, David W. Ragsdale, and Peter P. Strzok, "Neem in Niger: A New Context for a System of Indigenous Knowledge," in D.M. Warren, David Brokensha, and L. Jan Slikkerveer (eds.). *Indigenous Knowledge Systems: The Cultural Dimension of Development*, (London: Kegan Paul International, 1992) 48-56

Indigenous knowledge and Social Relationships

Social cohesion has been the key to survival for many indigenous cultures. Food gathering and hunting depend on mutual support and cooperation, and disharmony within a part of the groups is dangerous to the whole. In many cultures men and women have developed complementary, if not equal, roles; political decisions are arrived at by consensus in many cultures, and other social arrangements that benefit the entire community have often been incorporated into indigenous cultural traditions.

Marriage, for example, is an integral part of the social system political, economic, and spiritual in many indigenous societies. For example, in some parts of North East India, the groom must pay a high dowry but, in return, the wife becomes a member of the husband's clan under the direct authority of the household. Marriage can also ensure political stability for the community (by regulating exchange between groups), and continuing harmony with the spirit world. For essentially religious reasons, marriage may be prohibited between a man and woman of the same kin group; in other societies it can only take place within the kin group. The notion of marriage as a relationship founded only on the bond of romantic love is rarely, if ever, seen in traditional societies.

The nuclear family, too, is a rare concept. A complex interweaving of lineage, clan, and family connections means that most individuals are related to each other, a tradition that fosters the sense of belonging to the group, and of the need to share.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted the survival orientation of indigenous knowledge by suitable references to aboriginal systems of knowledge as manifested in the knowledge repositories of indigenous groups from India, with particular reference to Chattisgarh and other Asian groups of people. The survival centeredness of indigenous knowledge and the presuppositions and world views on which it is based contribute to the process of sustainable living and development, a factor that we as a world community can no longer ignore.

Knowing Together in Compassion and Confrontation: Social Movements, Gift of Knowledge and the Challenge of Transformations*

Ananta Kumar Giri

The author is on the faculty of Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai. In this article he deals with the importance of knowing together which implies not only empathy but also constructive confrontation. Social movements are spaces of learning together and as agents of knowledge, they facilitate a common learning. The author gives the example of workers movement in industrial revolution, Habitat for Humanity, Swadhyaya movement, World Social Forum movements etc. which produce, through inter subjectivity, new knowledge.

The Calling of Knowledge and the Adventure and Invitation of Knowing Together

In the Bible we read about a woman who is wailing in the streets and her name is Wisdom. She is weeping because despite knocking we are not opening our doors. But in human journey as well as in our contemporary world it is not only wisdom which is weeping but also knowledge as it has become imprisoned within varieties of structures

* I thank Professor Felix Wilfred for his invitation to write this essay and Sumanprava Giri for editing. I am now preparing a book on knowledge entitled *Knowledge and Human Liberation* due to be published from Routledge India which may interest the readers.

of domination, commodification, human interest, illusion, isolation—both objectivist and subjectivist—and epistemological fixation. But to know is not only to know of but also to know with—a practice of knowing which involves both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world¹. It is a process of knowing where we hold each other's hands, look up to the face of each other and learn together. This helps us realize our primordial need for self-knowledge ("Know Thyself") and the knowledge of the other. It is in this process of knowing together that knowledge becomes a journey of co-realization, co-learning and collective learning involving both ontology and epistemology, joy as well as suffering. Suffering comes from structures of domination imposed upon us limiting our reality and possibility of coming together and freely learning and sharing our heart; joy comes from the very striving towards it despite imposed restrictions and fears of many kinds. Suffering also has a much deeper root, for example, suffering emerging from our lack of readiness to embrace a new definition of self and society and clinging to our earlier conception of self. Joy emerges from experiences of breaking open such boundaries and realizing liberation.

Such practices of knowing together involve both compassion and confrontation.

In practices of knowing together we create a compassionate community and help each other to learn. This is also a space of solidarity, a solidarity which is always in a process of fuller realization rather than a fixed thing. In knowing together we compassionately understand each other, our points of view, including those of the ones we confront and in the process our points of view become circles of view capable of more generous embrace. In knowing together we also confront each other, our existing conception of self, nature and society especially those conceptions which reiterate structures of domination and do not facilitate realization of our human, societal, divine and cosmic potential. But this confrontation takes varieties of

1 cf. Sunder Rajan 1988; Ananta Kumar Giri 2009 (ed.) *Pathways of Creative Research: Towards a Festival of Dialogues*. New Delhi: Shipra.

forms—violent, non-violent, dualistic as well as non-dual. There are also practices of knowing together which involves compassionate confrontation where partners of confrontation are not eternal demons; though we fight, we realize that we are part of a bigger drama of co-realization where we are not just to annihilate our enemies but create a field where transformation embraces both the self and the other.

Knowledge as knowing together helps us overcome varieties of philosophical and social illusions, for example, of both objectivism and subjectivism but it does not reduce knowledge only to public communication. It cultivates both self and social knowledge in a way that one helps the other to blossom in non-reductive and multi-dimensional ways.

Social Movements as Fields of

Knowing Together in Compassion and Confrontation

Knowledge is at the root of realization of living and in spaces of togetherness living is nurtured and cultivated. It is in these spaces of togetherness with all their challenges and contradictions that life has learnt the art of living and facing the challenges of evolution. It is in the spaces of togetherness that humanity has also learnt about life, self and society. These spaces are not just collectivist spaces they are also spaces of self, co- and societal meditation. We find examples of such spaces of togetherness as spaces of knowledge and meditation in many different traditions of human striving—religion, art and sciences. In the Christian quest, early Christianity was characterized by such spaces of togetherness where co-travelers with Jesus realized the significance of his teaching by living together and confronting their earlier self conception as well as structures of domination which hindered realization of human, social and divine potential. These spaces of togetherness were animated by a spirit of compassion and confrontation. We find similar experiments in the pathways inspired by Buddha. Buddha embodied both compassion and confrontation. He inspired practices of living and sharing together the gift of knowledge, i.e. each of us already has sparks of Enlightenment with us, with all sections of society, especially the downtrodden and outcastes. Buddha also confronted existing structures of domination,

especially dominating knowledge, and not to accept any thing in the name of custom and tradition ².

In human histories we see such spaces of togetherness unfolding in varieties of social movements—socio-political and socio-spiritual. Movements such as Bhakti and varieties of social, political and spiritual movements in our multiple histories have presented fields in which fellow beings have come together, have learnt new knowledge about themselves, each other, society, nature and cosmos. In these fields they have also learnt how to overcome their existing conceptions of self and social order and feel confident about such self-knowledge and social knowledge. For example, in our turbulent histories in the last two hundred years workers' movements and anti-colonial and post-colonial struggles for freedom have been critical factors of transformation and these movements have challenged existing structures of self and social formation. Workers' movements have fought for dignity of labor and against the oppression by bourgeoisie struggling for not only their freedom but also for fuller social becoming and freedom for all. Struggles for freedom have also created new knowledge of self, society and the world confronting the existing colonial structure of self-formation, social governance and exploitation. In Gandhi's anti-colonial and post-colonial struggle for freedom this process of knowing together transcended many boundaries. As a space of togetherness Gandhi-inspired mobilizations, like Buddha and Jesus before him, created spaces of compassion and confrontation in which seeking and struggling participants knew together in struggle. This struggle brought together men and women from diverse backgrounds including sympathetic transformers such as CF Andrews from the national space of the colonizers.

In our contemporary world as it is in the last half century varieties of movements despite inevitable and understandable human and social limitation continue to create multiple fields of knowing together. They act as agents of self-production, both self and social and challenge

2 Michael Carrithers, 1983. *Buddha*. Oxford: Oxford U. Press, Colombo: Sarvodaya Visvalekha.

the available conceptions of normality and pathology³. In our most recent past gay and lesbian movements have challenged dominant structures of sexuality by creating spaces where people feel confident to share with each other their deepest self-knowledge and enjoy the spiritual grace of their sexual preference. Similarly an emergent world-wide differently-abled movement confronts the existing structure of domination vis-à-vis physical handicap and disability by creating physical and emotional space for expressing ourselves in our own “differently-abled ways”. These movements follow other expressive movements in art, literature, social criticism and politics. Environmental movements and now the emerging movements for global justice such as World Social Forum movements continue to create fields of knowledge as knowing together challenging our existing self conception and relationship between self and society, nature and society.

We can here also briefly consider some other movements such as Habitat for Humanity, Swadhyaya and integral education with which I have done fieldwork over the last two decades⁴. Habitat for Humanity is a Christian socio-religious movement which builds houses with low-income families and through its vision and practice it creates a field of knowing together that despite great challenges we are not helpless and we can create a world where there are “No More Shacks.” Swadhaya is a socio-spiritual movement from contemporary Hindu space which challenges that none of us are poor because God is in our hearts. Integral education is a vibrant educational movement in India drawing inspiration from the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo which strives for the integral unfoldment of individuals and societies—physical, vital, mental, psychical, and spiritual. All these three

3 cf. Das 2003, Alain Touraine, 1977. *Self-Production of Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

4 Ananta Kumar Giri, 2002. *Building in the Margins of Shacks: The Vision and Projects of Habitat for Humanity*. Delhi: Orient Longman. 2004. *Reflections and Mobilizations: Dialogues with Movements and Voluntary Organizations*. Delhi: Sage. 2008. *Self-Development and Social Transformations? The Vision and Practice of the Self-Study Mobilization of Swadhyaya*. Jaipur: Rawat & Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

movements, like many such other movements, present a new self-knowledge intimating a greater path of transformation though they are also entangled with many conflicts and contradictions. It is by taking part in these movements that participants realize the significance of such new self-knowledge and then learn to put into practice in wider social experiments such as building houses, schools and inter-village agricultural projects.

Social movements thus facilitate knowing, they are agents of knowledge—cognitive agents. They are fields of learning—self as well as collective. In the creative work of Piet Strydom⁵, social movements are not only cognitive agents of collective learning, they are also fields of triple contingency where we learn the significance of a third point of view going beyond the exclusivity and dualism of the first and the second, self and the other, fighter and the enemy.

But social movements are not only cognitive agents in a narrow way, they are also spaces of emotional intersubjectivity. Spaces of togetherness from the dawn of humanity till the present are not only cognitive spaces but also emotional spaces of mutual nurturance and nurturance of flames of aspiration through music, art, poetry and other expressive creativity. It is not true that we find such expressive dimension only in the so-called new social movements in the last three decades or so. The workers movements more than hundred years ago in Europe also had a vibrant musical and literary engagement as do many political movements now such as the Zapatista movement in contemporary Mexico. Social movements as fields of knowing together are multi-dimensional spaces of cognition and emotional nurturance, knowledge and art of life.

These social movements are also fields of critiques and reconstructions. They are fields of socio-cognitive critique critiquing existing knowledge of self and society. They are also spaces of what Strydom (2009) calls *endeedtic critique* which challenges existing ends of life. It is in such critiques that social movements touch a

5 Piet Strydom, 2009. *New Horizons of Critical Theory: Collective Learning and Triple Contingency*. New Delhi: Shipra.

deeper dimension of human existence and embrace spiritual questioning of self and society. They ask questions about ends of life and the meaning of life.

Gift of Knowledge and the Challenge of Transformation

Life is not a property, life is a gift. Knowledge also is not a property, it is a gift. We partake in this gift of life, we stand upon the great heritage of knowledge and life and the only way we can pay back our debt to this heritage is by giving unconditionally the knowledge and life we have received. But not only today but down the ages knowledge has been bounded in various ways ("Prometheus Bound") and used for domination rather than for liberation and unfoldment of potential. In the past and also in the present knowledge was and is being denied to vast sections of societies—slaves, women, untouchables, low-caste, poor and the gentiles. These structures of exclusion have been challenged in some ways but yet much still remains to be done thus calling for the need to take part in varieties of movements of transformation.

Now we are confronted with an unprecedented challenge of commercialization and commodification of knowledge which starts from the kindergarten and follows all the way to portals of higher education. Even a daily wage earner has to spend Rs 200 per month per child for schooling.⁶ What kind of society is this?

Today commodification of knowledge is reaching a level of obscenity and sacrilege which is an assault on the essential divine dimension of knowledge. It is an assault on both Sophia and Sarasvati. With new weapons such as intellectual property rights producers of knowledge are becoming slaves in the valorization of capital, losing their dignity and responsibility. Even spaces of knowledge sharing are become spaces of capital. One day I was passing through Bristol, England and got to meet the professor who was organizing an interesting international conference the very next day. I naturally felt attracted and was prepared to sleep in the cold streets of the city just to listen to these words of wisdom but the professor told me that

6 The school may be free but he has to send his wards for tuition.

without paying a registration fee which ran up to hundreds of pounds I could not attend the seminar. I asked him: "You are organizing the seminar any way. I am a passer by. Is your seminar going to suffer any loss if I do not pay? But by denying me participation are you fulfilling your sacred task as a practitioner of knowledge? Aren't you making it a money-making machine?"

Making knowledge a gift is a continued challenge for us and it calls for multi-dimensional transformation—self as well as structural. Those of us who are on paths of learning have to confront the contemporary structures of commodification of knowledge by not only giving and opening up our spaces of knowledge to all souls but also by ourselves becoming gifts of knowledge and life. We have to embody compassion and confrontation in our lives and varieties of spaces of togetherness where we belong. Here we can draw inspiration from movements such as copy left movements which are fighting against copy right exclusion by creating knowledge in the open source. We can also draw inspiration from an emerging vibrant independent media movement across the world called Indy Media which is creating spaces of knowledge beyond the corporate domination of our contemporary media. We can draw inspiration from such movements in the present as well as in the past and continue to embody compassion and confrontation in our practices and processes of knowing together.

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